AS NO WOMAN HATH LOVED

LAURA LOU BROOKMAN

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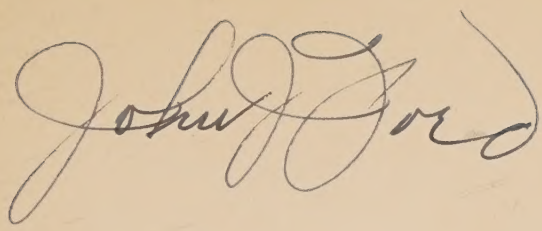

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As No Woman Hath Loved

BY

LAURA LOU BROOKMAN

AUTHOR OF
THE HEART BANDIT
HER LOVE PROBLEM
PLAYMATE, ETC.

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AS NO WOMAN HATH LOVED

CHAPTER I

A GIRL WITH RED HAIR

"Gee! Sure's a SWELL picture!"

And it was. The hard guy wearing the alternately striped red and white cap pulled down over his eyes, faded blue overalls slung by a lone shoulder strap and nondescript sweater stood with hands on hips, feet wide apart. He gazed in ten-year-old reverence.

Jimmy Hoskins was right. The picture WAS swell, gorgeous, magnificent. Jimmy's error was in looking at the wrong picture.

None but a male under twelve years of age would have stood as Jimmy stood, admiring the picture of a wild west hero and neglecting the Main Event.

There she was!

Peaches and cream, copper and sapphire. Nose airily tip-tilting, eyes like the sea, lips by her favorite maker of lipstick. A dash of deviltry about 'em. Oh yes—also an assortment of supple young curves soothing to the eye but otherwise inviting unrest. The whole (appropriately enough) encased within glass.

Connie Marsh sat inside her glass fronted ticket window selling admission to the Bijou Motion Picture Theatre. Matinees, adults 25, children 15; evenings, adults 50, children 25.

"How's business, Kid?"

The provoking tilt of Miss Connie Marsh's aristocratic little nose gained an accent.

"Did you wish to buy a ticket?" she asked.

The young man addressed grinned. He possessed a square-cut sort of good looks, dark eyes and dark hair showing below the grey hat. His suit of oxford worsted was brilliantly set off by a violet tie.

Connie noticed the violence of the neckwear. Anybody would have noticed it. But Connie's taste evidently was not for violet.

"B-r-r-r!" said the young man, turning up his coat collar in mock preparation for a chilly breeze. He thrust through the square cut in the glass window a crumpled dollar bill.

"Oh, no—I'm prospectin'—for goldfish," he went on. "Gosh, what a cold day THIS turned out to be!"

"Don't hold up the line, please."

Everyone might buy tickets but not everyone might linger to talk to Constance Marsh!

Apparently delighted by the icy sparks from her majesty the young man, grinning and languid, entered the dark doors of the Bijou.

As the line subsided (it was a real event when that line waiting to buy tickets numbered at one time more than ten) Connie procured from a drawer under the narrow ledge of the ticket window a small squarish, scarlet case. She snapped back the lid.

Followed moments devoted to art.

A touch of powder (rachel shade with such a fresh, cool fragrance) for the nose. A little more sticky red stuff on the miniature oval of her lips. A satisfied survey.

Connie smiled, tucking the red case back into its place. There are at least several million other girls in the United States who would smile too, if they could look that way.

It wasn't any secret that Connie Marsh was the prettiest girl in Monroe Junction.

And when she wasn't warding off mashers, Connie was almost always a light-hearted, smiling young person. Connie "got a great kick" out of living.

As a matter of fact she wasn't bothered by the breezy, flippant movie-goers. On her initial appearance at the Bijou she had learned it was all part of the game. She didn't encourage the boys at all. Oh no—the skill and cunning with which Connie curbed her admirers was certainly artistic!

Suddenly the girl saw someone coming and leaned forward eagerly.

"Hello, Max. Did you get it?"

"Sure. Gee—I'm crazy about it, too! I had Miss Hadley turn up the hem and it fits perfectly!"

"Going to wear it tonight?"

"Sure. What're you going to wear?"

"Black satin, I suppose."

"You can have my green beads. They'll look keen."

Maxine Fisher and Connie Marsh had been at the stage of mutually borrowing clothes for many

months. Than which no bond in feminine friendship is stronger.

"You'll be around about 9, I suppose?"

"Yes. We'll stop for you."

Maxine turned to go but a telegraphic eyebrow (Connie's right one) brought her back. She stepped nearer the ticket window, slowly turned her lowered head and looked in the direction indicated.

A young man was emerging from the theatre. It was the "fresh" stranger who had merited Connie's scorn. Without glancing toward either of the girls he strolled across the street.

"Who is he?"

"Don't know. Sort of good looking, don't you think? Tried to get fresh but I stopped him."

"Must be a stranger. He's got a big town look. Well, so long. See you later. Goodbye."

There was contrast between the two girls. Maxine was slimmer than her friend, wore boyish clothes and a ragged wind-blown bob. Russet freckles decorated her small nose and her smile held a note of impudence.

After the matinee Connie hurried home for the evening meal, reminding her mother that if anyone called she should take the number and to tell Bob if he dropped around to come over to the theatre. Bob was taking Connie to a dance at "Roseland."

"You won't be late tonight, will you, Connie?"

"I don't think so. But we'll be back here before starting anyhow. I've got to dress. So long, Dad. Goodbye."

Three hours later a battered flivver halted, sputtered and died before the Fisher residence.

There were soprano giggles accompanied by a subdued bass. Two figures crossed the lawn toward the bungalow.

"Well—so you got here!"

Out of the silvery shade of vines hiding the porch swing Maxine Fisher emerged. A young man was beside her.

"Hello, Maxine. Hello, Ted."

"Hello—are you ready?"

The four young people went out to the car. Bob and Connie took the front seat. Maxine and Ted climbed into the rear.

They reached "Roseland".

A large, square pavillion, roofed, three sides left open, its ceiling festooned with rainbow bunting, its floor played upon by spotlights of changing hue—that was Roseland. That and a riotous din of joyful jazz.

The call of "Victor's Vagabonds" was irresistible. Amid air reeking with banjo, trumpet and saxophone, the rainbow lights flickered on the dancers.

A mellow tenor in the distance was crooning:

"I love my Ba-ha-by—my Baby loves me-ee!"

In the encircling blue serge of Bob Knight's arm Connie joined the swaying, rhythmic mass. Connie's copper head snuggled agreeably near Bob's. He held her closely.

Connie didn't mind a bit.

She liked to dance with Bob. He was one of the best steppers in the crowd and they'd had plenty of practice. Bob Knight was Connie's steady beau.

Maxine and Ted drifted past.

Presently the dance was finished. There was a

rush toward the little white gates separating the slick, polished floor from the narrower surrounding space. Connie and Bob pushed through the nearest gate. They stopped to join a group.

Again the "Vagabonds" struck up.

Connie danced with Bob. She danced with Ted after that and with Bob again and then with two other young men. She was having a wonderful evening. Connie's eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed. Oh yes, marvelous!

It was some time later that Bob Knight, anxious and alone, found Ted Forbes and Maxine during an intermission.

"Say—have you seen Connie?"

"Why, sure. Just a minute ago. She was out there dancing. Can't you find her?"

"No. She didn't dance that last one. I've been looking for her."

The saxophone and banjos launched a splitting attack. The shuffling feet began again. Ted and Maxine smiled sympathetically and floated off across the floor.

Bob Knight looked gloomily about. How did he know where she was or who the dickens she might be with? Maybe sitting out there with Art King in his new car. No. Art had that blond across the room.

Then his eyes narrowed. He saw Connie. She was dancing slowly, beautifully. Her slim black satin figure was the mold of grace. A whirl to the right sent her full skirt fluttering up above graceful silken knees. It showed a golden garter.

But all that Bob Knight saw as the couple whirled past him was the man in whose arms

Connie was dancing—Victor, the leader of the Vagabonds!

Naturally of a patient, long suffering disposition, Bob Knight suddenly saw red.

The music ceased and before Connie and her partner could leave the floor Bob was beside them.

"I think," he said shortly, "Miss Marsh has the next dance with me."

"Oh, really!" Connie's tone was far below zero!

Victor, the Vagabond, said something hurriedly and went to his waiting musicians.

Connie, head high and indignant, walked beside Bob to a nearby corner. It was deserted by dancers and looked like a good place to quarrel.

"I'm not going to dance with you."

"Oh, yes you are!"

"I'm not!"

"Listen—do you think it's right to go picking up strange fellows you've never seen before, dancing with 'em and sitting out dances out there in the dark? A fellow you don't even know—just a jazz hound—because he's got slick hair and plays a banjo? Do you think that's any way to act? Say——"

Bob had chosen the most foolish of all weapons —argument. But his words were cut short.

Like a lashing flame the little copper head turned on him.

"I didn't—" Connie paused a moment. Then reckless ardor came into her eyes. "Don't you talk to me, Bob Knight! Don't you dare! So I 'pick up' strangers, do I? I'll never dance

with you again! Never, never! Wait—I'll just show you!"

She whirled, chin in the air, and made for the entrance of the ball room. Without a glance behind, Connie grasped the arm of the man nearest the doorway—a man wearing a violet tie.

Bob might have been anchored to the spot. He saw Connie Marsh speaking to this stranger, saw the man answer and the two leave the hall.

Then like a flash Bob Knight was in action. He ran down the passageway, made the stairs in two leaps. Through the lines of parked automobiles on out to the clearing. There Bob stopped.

Far in the distance came the droning noise of a motor car.

CHAPTER II

STOLEN KISSES ARE SWEET

A YOUNG man alone stood in the roadway. His figure, silhouetted against the brilliant lights of "Roseland" dance palace, was motionless.

In his cheeks flamed an angry surge of red. Bob Knight gripped his hands tightly. He was desperate—and what could he do?

Merrily mocking him, dwindling in the darkness of the road, gleamed the ruby light of an automobile. Bob's girl and Somebody Else were in that car.

"Hell!" said Bob Knight.

Which just about expressed it.

Connie Marsh WAS his girl! She had always been—at least ever since he'd wanted anything to do with girls. Why, Bob had asked Connie to marry him on three distinct occasions.

Who was that fellow with her? And why—oh why!—did Connie always have to get mad and fly away like that? What had he done? Just trying to protect her. Trying to make her see a girl can't fool around with strangers like that orchestra leader. Oh, damn the orchestra leader!

But something had to be DONE about this.

Bob's jaw set and, looking every inch of his five feet ten the big he-man of the motion pictures, Bob Knight strode back to the pavillion.

Some fine day he'd teach Connie Marsh a thing or two!

Bob mounted the steps leading to the dance floor, looked about a moment, then edged his way over toward Ted Forbes, standing in a group by the rail.

"Well—did you find Connie?"

"Yeah. Say, Ted, mind if we beat it home now? Connie wants to leave. Can you and Maxine get home just as well if we go on ahead?"

"Why—sure. But you don't want to go yet. Why——"

"Connie wants to."

"Well, it's all right with us—we'll get back. Only you're crazy to beat it just when——"

"So long. See you later."

That was better than letting the whole crowd know how Connie'd run away from him. Bob found his unprepossessing automobile, climbed into it and cycloned down the road. He had to make up for lost time!

Miraculously when he reached Monroe Junction's outskirts the flivver was intact.

Bob slowed to something like thirty-five miles an hour and snorted down Maple Avenue. He turned for a block. Two more. Then he let the flivver barely crawl.

There on the left side of Ninth Street, third house down from the end of the block, was Connie Marsh's home. In front of that house now loomed the shadowy outlines of a well built roadster.

"Who, the devil—" Bob Knight repeated to himself.

The flivver stole past. Bob's glance failed to

reveal much. He knew that inside the car Connie Marsh was sitting with that other fellow. The roadster's lights were dimmed.

Burning indignation filled Bob Knight's soul.

Connie Marsh was just too popular. That was what was the matter with her! Bad for any girl. Thought she could do anything she pleased with any fellow in the world. He'd show her!

Bob turned the flivver toward the hill road. As he passed the last houses, began to breathe the country air, he grew calmer.

Connie would probably always be just like that. She didn't mean anything by it. Gosh, she looked pretty tonight!

Half an hour later Bob again drove down Ninth Street. The roadster stood in the same place.

A sensible youth, Bob Knight went home and went to bed. Tomorrow he'd find out about this new guy. It seemed that wherever Connie Marsh went there always would be new guys. She didn't mean half she'd said though. Tomorrow she'd be over it.

WOULD she?

When Connie Marsh shook her beautifully disdainful copper head and flounced out of "Roseland" ballroom she did it to show Bob Knight.

Bob could give her orders, could he?

He'd see!

Afterward when she was sitting in the roadster, when the car was cutting through the black night and she glanced at the man beside her—Connie's heart missed a beat.

Oh, Connie, Connie!

A red head and disposition to match can cause a girl a lot of grief.

She realized with a start that this young fellow beside her, the one she had practcially ASKED to take her home was that fresh stranger she'd seen at the theatre. Then it was that Connie longer for Bob Knight. Longed and prayed for him.

It was the only time she was to think of Bob that night, though. There were other things!

The man in gray turned laughing, impudent eyes on her. The roadster was doing all of forty-five miles an hour.

"Well, sister—I see you've changed your mind."

Connie's heart beats accelerated.

"Changed my—mind?"

"Sure. Givin' me the Greenland's Icy Mountains stare this afternoon, weren't you? Down at the movie house! Gee, I'm glad to see you friendly now. I like you lots better this way. Yes, I do. Boy, WAS she angry! Say—what'd that guy do back there to make you get so mad? Tear down your play house? Want me to go back and punch his nose?"

"No. I just want you to—take me home!"

"Home? Right at the beginning of the evening! Why, Sweet One, it's early! Isn't nearly time to take little girls home yet. Can't do that!"

The copper curls fluttered in the night wind. Connie brushed them back and glanced at her companion. He grinned derisively. But there was no laughter in the girl's face. The blue eyes were steady—trying to be that way.

"I'm a darned fool!" she said slowly. "You

don't have to take me home. Stop and—let me out!"

"Sweet One! I'm surprised. First you pick a guy and ask him to run away with you. Then you crab the evening like a bag of gloom and want to run away all by yourself. Oh, no you don't!"

"I'm just a darned fool," the girl went on miserably. "You think I'm crazy, I suppose. But I didn't—didn't mean to do this. I didn't realize you weren't one of the fellows around here I've always known. Oh, I must have looked wild."

"And very pretty too! Very pretty! Little dash of gin'll fix you up first rate. No, I'm sorry, it isn't in the car. But I know a guy who—listen here, Babe, tell me what was the main idea of the hurry call?"

Now Connie Marsh could use her head for other things besides its obviously decorative purpose. Besides, they were drawing nearer to Monroe Junction all the while.

Connie lowered her eyes and when she glanced again at the young man it was through tantalizing long fringed lashes.

"If I tell—will you help me?"

"Sure! What's the game?"

"You'll find out. Listen, take the left turn as soon as we come to it!"

"But what's the game?"

"You'll see. Tell me—why did you want to leave the theatre so soon today? Didn't you like the show?"

"Oh, sure. The show was all right. Fine! I

just—remembered some things I had to tend to."

"You haven't been in town very long, have you? I don't think I've seen you before today—and I usually see everybody."

"Yeah. I'll believe that, all right."

Connie Marsh had taken a fresh grip on her nerves. She was doing nicely too. Five minutes more and they'd be in sight of town.

"What's your name?" she asked softly. She moved nearer the man behind the wheel.

"My name—why, now that isn't fair! You haven't told me yours."

"Oh, I'm Connie Marsh. Didn't you know? But I suppose not. Everybody knows me here, of course. Have you ever been in Monroe Junction before?"

"Nope. Maybe I'll settle down though. I'm beginning to like it!" He grinned.

"But, tell me, where'd you come from? What do you do?"

It didn't occur to Connie until days afterward how skillfully the youth avoided her questions. His eyes, though, grew cautious.

"Oh, I breezed in this morning—from the west. I suppose you've lived here all your life, have you?"

"Yes. There's the turn there I told you about. To the left. East again after we hit the next road. Yes, I've spent all my life right here. But I'm crazy to get away! Go places and do things! I want to see the big cities and shows and the rich people with their lovely clothes and everything. Oh, it must be grand!"

Connie meant all this. Her eyes were radiant.

"Why don't you try Hollywood?"

"Hollywood!"

"Sure. Where the camera shutters click. Great place. I've been out there——"

"You mean you've been in HOLLYWOOD!"

"Why sure. They've got trains there, you know. Run on tracks. You can buy tickets."

"Oh, tell me about it——"

Connie almost forgot to direct him down Ninth Street. She pointed to her father's house.

"That's the place. Stop here. But go on. Tell me—did you ever see John Gilbert?"

"Little devil! All you wanted was to make me bring you home. I knew it though—you didn't fool me! Sure I've seen all of 'em. Do you like Gilbert? Honey, now if you're going to look at me like that I just can't help——"

"You're—you're horrid!"

Connie rubbed the offended cheek. "How dare you——"

"Gosh, how could I HELP IT? You don't expect me to apologize? With those pretty little lips so handy. Kid, there isn't anybody in Hollywood who can touch you. I mean it! C'mon——!"

But Connie wouldn't have his arm around her. She pushed it back. It would be sure to mean—another kiss. And Connie was still holding her breath from the last one. Good gracious, what was the matter with her tonight?

"I don't know you," she said, looking at the dark, curly head beside her. "I never saw you before today and I don't even know your name. Thanks for bringing me home! I really ought to go in now."

It would be hard to think of a more concise

accurate way of putting the facts. Everything was exactly as Connie said. Yes, she ought to have gone in.

Instead——

There came a smothered "Ooh!" a rush of motion, and the copper head sank in a neighborhood of shoulder and arms. There were hot, quick kisses on her forehead, on her cheeks, on her throat. After that upon her lips. Such a long, long kiss. And after that—there wasn't anything.

CHAPTER III

CONNIE DECIDES

It was a long time before Connie Marsh raised her head from that shoulder. Then the fire seemed to have died. She looked colorless. Only the great burning eyes blazed in the girl's white face. She turned to the man who had kissed her; Connie said in a low startled voice:

"Who—who ARE you?"

His eyes were bright too. A change—curious, evasive—seemed to have come over the stranger.

"My name? You don't know my name? It's Nor—Norris, kid. Gene Norris. Gosh, but you're wonderful! Don't you know that? You're wonderful!"

He reached toward her, would have taken her again, but Connie held away.

"No!" she said sharply. "We mustn't!" the low door of the roadster swung open. One foot touched the running board.

"You're not going! Not after—you can't get away from me now, kid. Gee, I'm just crazy about you—you've got to stay——"

Oh, it was a mad night. A wild night! Connie Marsh couldn't understand what it was that made her do such things, say such things. She wasn't herself—that was all.

Now she stood on the ground, looking at Gene

Norris. She was waiting. She didn't know exactly what she was waiting for.

"I've got to go in!" she repeated, wondering how her own voice could sound so strange, why her feet didn't take her away from this man.

"But you can't go! Listen, come on! We'll drive around some more. We'll——"

Connie backed away against a tree. Somehow she had to get away from the sight of him. When he looked at her like that—well, she'd better go!

"I'm going!" Connie insisted. She turned her back and started toward the porch.

He was beside her, walking with her, pleading. They crossed the lawn and Connie set one foot on the step to the porch.

"Everything's—so queer!—tonight!" She said, "I don't understand myself. You'd—you'd better go!"

"But I'm never going! Kid, I tell you I can't let you alone. Gee, you've got me crazy!"

Her eyes met his and the thing (as well she might have known it would) happened. Gene's arms were holding her again, Gene's lips crushed hard against hers, Gene's heart beat against her heart.

"Let me go!" breathed Connie. "Let me go!"

"Where'll—where'll I see you tomorrow?"

"I don't—know."

"Connie—you've got to listen to me. Listen, Connie, I'll be at the theatre tomorrow night. What time can you get through?"

"About nine." And all the time a warning voice was pounding in the back of Connie's head. "You mustn't see him again, Connie. You mustn't see him!"

"I'll be waiting. With the car. Honey, aren't you going to kiss me again? Kiss me good night!"

Connie's lips trembled. In her eyes there was a dazzling light that had not been there before.

"I've got to go inside now," she said for at least the fifth time. She gave him a little white hand but turned her head. Then the door opened and swallowed the girl's figure.

A bewildered young man stood watching that closed door for several seconds, glanced about him at the neat little front lawn in the white moonlight and walked away to the street.

Lights flashed presently. The roadster pulled out from the curb and disappeared from sight.

It had been the privilege of Connie Marsh ever since she started selling tickets at the Bijou Theatre three months earlier not to be awakened until 10 o'clock in the morning. Thus, between daybreak and that hour, Connie did manage to get some sleep.

When Mrs. Marsh knocked at the door and opened it wide enough to put her head into the room at five minutes past ten Connie raised her eyelids, blinked them once or twice, tried again and got the blue eyes open.

"Morning, Mother."

"Good morning, Connie. The coffee's on. My goodness, you look sleepy! What time was it when you came in?"

"Oh—Oh, I don't know." Mrs. Marsh failed to interpret the change which flashed across her daughter's face. " 'Bout 1 o'clock, I suppose. Ho-hum! I'm lazy."

"Don't be too long now! It's getting late."

Mrs. Marsh closed the door and proceeded to further duties.

Connie rumpled the back of her bobbed locks and lay speculatively staring at the ceiling. She was one hundred per cent wide awake. Bewildered by those suddenly arising memories of last night.

Still, against the white covers, Connie Marsh reviewed her adventures. Twenty-four hours ago—yesterday morning—she didn't even know Gene Norris was alive and now he had become the central element in her life.

Gene Norris! Gene must be for Eugene. It was a nice name.

Glowing rose tinged the girl's cheeks.

Connie had been kissed a little oftener perhaps than most pretty eighteen year olds. She couldn't see any harm in it when you knew that the boy was nice. The rest of the crowd did it. Oh, of course, not too much! It was just like wearing skirts above your knees and bobbed hair. Both would have been wrong in mother's day (she said they still were) but everybody else did them now. Besides, kissing was—nice.

But oh, she'd never before been kissed as last night!

Connie Marsh pulled herself up in bed, smoothed down the flimsy pink voile nightie so that it covered her, and poked a toe from the covers foraging for slippers.

She found them, stood up and dropped the nightie. She was straight, slim, and beautifully formed!

Draped in a coolie coat which matched her eyes, Connie dashed for the bath. She returned, fresh

and glowing, to pull on one undergarment, one pair of chiffon hose of honey shade, one blue linen frock and suede strap slippers.

Then breakfast. Connie always had orange juice and coffee at 10 o'clock. No more until 12 when she would lunch with her parents. She had to be at the theatre by 1 o'clock.

Connie was punctual about arriving at the ticket window.

Such a place isn't—when you come to think about it—the ideal place for philosophic contemplation. Facing on Broad Street, Connie Marsh could watch every passerby on the principal thoroughfares of Monroe Junction. Besides there were innumerable interruptions handing out pink cardboard tickets and making change.

By 2 o'clock Connie had decided she wasn't going to see Gene Norris that night. Who was he, anyhow? An absolute stranger who dressed swell and drove a good car. For all she knew he might be—oh, anybody.

By 2:30 Connie had changed her mind.

By 3 o'clock she was trying to invent strategy which would avoid the necessity of making any decision at all. By 4:30 the thing was definitely settled.

It was settled in this way. Connie glanced to the right and saw, far down Broad Street, Bob Knight approaching.

Now all her life after Connie had done something impulsively which hurt anyone she was sorry for it and wanted to make amends. She felt that way particularly about Bob Knight.

She unfastened the little glass window and swung it open to him.

"Bob," she asked, "what have you been doing all day? I wanted to see you."

"Oh—nothing much I guess."

Bob who was 22 years old and had finished Monroe Junction's small college, was working in his father's clothing store. Mr. Knight could have afforded easily to send his son to one of the famous universities. He preferred to have Bob home and Bob, always amenable, did not question his father's choice.

"Suppose you got home all right—last night?" he asked.

"Listen, Bob" (Connie's cheeks flushed becomingly) "I'm so ashamed of myself! That was an awful trick to play. You're going to—forgive me, aren't you? If I promise—from now on—to be good?"

She looked so darn cute! Bob Knight couldn't help himself. He loved her.

"That's all right, Connie."

"Then, there's just one way to prove it to me, Robert Knight! Just one way!"

"What's that?"

"Well, it's pretty terrible! You've got to ask me for a date."

"What'll it be?"

"Anything you say. I hope I don't have to promote the REST of this party!"

"Why sure, Connie. Sure, I'll tell you—Ted told me the gang's going to drive over to Johnson's Lake tonight for a swim. It's moonlight, you know and besides the place is always bright."

"To—tonight?"

"Sure, I'll be around here a little before 9

o'clock. Yep, young woman, this date's going to be tonight!"

"Why, sure, Bob!"

One pair of eyes bright and dancing hurried down the street. One pair of eyes, dim and indecisive, gazed out across Broad Street.

Well, that settled things. And much better too. Now it was definite.

Connie reminded herself of all this several times before 5:30 o'clock. Then she started home.

"Oh—Miss Marsh!"

She had seen him coming, turned purposely down the side street to avoid a meeting. It was Gene Norris, catching step with her from behind.

"Hello," said Connie, steadying her voice.

"Hello, Kid. Be there tonight, won't you?"

The girl stood an instant looking at him. Yes, he was much better dressed, better looking than any of the Monroe Junction boys.

"No, Mr. Norris," Connie said. "I'm glad I saw you. No, I can't come. I've got an—engagement!"

"Sure! With me. Listen, I'll park the car in the shadow of the clock there, right at the side of the theatre. I'll be waiting——"

"But I can't come!"

"S'all right. See you tonight, Kid."

Norris was gone and Connie Marsh walked the rest of the way home telling herself how much better she felt for having told him definitely she wouldn't be there.

At 8:30 when Connie was through at the Bijou a familiar flivver parked in front of the theatre

with Bob Knight at the wheel. Connie hurried toward him.

"Listen, Bob. I've got the terriblest headache! Come on just since dinner. I'm afraid I couldn't swim tonight. Do you mind—very much?"

"Why, sure not, Connie. Gee, I'm sorry. Get in and I'll drive you home. That's too bad!"

It was so bad in fact that after Bob had let Connie out of the car before her father's house she decided a little walk and fresh air might help.

They must have done so. For, miraculously, when Connie Marsh reached a certain roadster parked at the side of the Bijou Theatre the headache had vanished.

She stepped into the car beside Gene Norris.

CHAPTER IV

AN INTERRUPTED EVENING

Connie Marsh knew she shouldn't have been there. And yet, as very often with the rest of us when we have a sturdy conviction that the thing we are doing shouldn't be done at all, Connie felt a rush of exquisite, warming joy.

She glanced up at the man through a velvety fringe of lash. Instinctively seeking cover, she glanced down again.

Did Gene feel the same way? It rather looked as though he did. Sweet to know this, yet curiously, dangerously unsteadying. She dared not lose herself in one of those wild moods as last night.

"Well—I came," Connie's voice sounded muffled.

"I knew you would!"

"Oh yes, I suppose so! I suppose every time you just look at a girl you wait half a minute and she falls in your arms."

It was the slangy banter that is the modern language of romance.

"Oh, I wouldn't put it that way exactly. Not quite! 'Course they generally DO fall. But I give 'em time—maybe a couple of days."

"Oh—is that so!"

"Yes, that's so. Gee, your hair isn't red at all, is it? Nope, coal black. Black, just like Clara

Bow's. Connie—you know I think you've got an awfully pretty name?"

"Do you think so?"

"Heard me, didn't you? Heard me say so."

"I've heard lots of people say lots of things——"

"Yes, but you believe me, don't you? You believe me when I tell you I never saw a girl in all my life who took me off my feet the way you have? Why, Kid——"

Gene Norris' oratory had one important point in its favor—a ready audience. He talked as Connie never before had heard any young man talk. It was all so—different! You could tell Gene Norris had been around. It wasn't just his looks. It was in his clothes and the way he wore a hat and the things he said. Anybody could see the difference between Gene Norris and—well, Bob Knight and the fellows in Monroe Junction.

"Gee," said Connie, "you certainly can rave!"

That was the sort of noncommittal answer which means to the initiated. "Go on. I'm interested."

The girl didn't give him a chance to go on, however.

"Where are we going?" she wanted to know. They had been driving swiftly (between forty and forty-five miles an hour all the way) since leaving the town behind. "I mustn't be out late again tonight."

"Why, I thought we'd go over to Morristown and see what's going on there. Pretty lively little place—Morristown."

Connie said to herself, "I suppose that's actually what he thinks too. Morristown—a lively little place!" The city of 150,000 population and

40 miles distance was Monroe Junction's metropolis.

"You should have told me!" Connie complained. "This old dress doesn't look fit to be seen in Morristown."

"Baby, you look like a million silver bucks to me!"

No girl can be a community belle of this day even in a place like Monroe Junction and not have heard similar speeches. It seemed though that the way Gene Norris had of saying things made them different.

Or perhaps the presence of a grey worsted arm put to the best of all possible uses about Connie's shoulders had something to do with it. The arm was there, not aggressively, but pleasantly insistent.

Another one of the things Connie Marsh shouldn't have done that night was to let the arm stay there. She did though.

"Must be Morristown ahead there, isn't it?" inquired Norris.

He was like that. One moment looking at a girl and talking with ardor—the next completely casual. It would be interesting to know if the feminine acquaintances of the famous Don Juan may not have noticed a similar quality in their friend. It is effective.

Gene Norris' manner in fact was so entirely efficacious that the girl beside him made no protests. Apparently the only question in the world on which Connie had her doubts at that moment was settled by drawing forth the little square vanity case and patting powder on her nose. The nose had been shiny.

They left the roadster in a parking station. It was a good looking roadster. Connie admired it more every time she saw it. Must have cost a lot of money.

"What'll it be, Kid? Want to dance or see a show or eat something first?"

"Oh, I don't know. Let's just walk around and see what the pictures are."

"Girl in a million! First time I ever heard one of 'em say, 'Let's walk'. All right though. Suits me."

Connie and Norris strolled over to Fourth Street.

"Hello there, Connie Marsh!"

"Hello!"

Connie's eyes sought those of her companion. They had passed a vivacious blond who stood talking with two men.

"Girl from home," explained Connie. "Name's that Evelyn Howard shouldn't be making the Morristown tonight."

It occurred to Connie to hope most fervently that Evelyn Howard shouldn't be making the same speculation about her or, at least if she should, that Evelyn would keep it to herself. Connie certainly wouldn't like to have Bob Knight find out——

They walked along Morristown's most prominent thoroughfare. The street gleamed with electricity. Past the Rivoli and Morristown theatres they continued, then turned to the right toward the Royal.

The young man gripped Connie's arm.

"Listen—" he said, and his voice hinted excitement. "We—we've got to go back to the car

for a minute. Do you mind? I—I forgot something."

"Why—why, of course not!"

What in the world though had made him look and act so queerly? Connie failed to understand the sudden change.

They were back at the parking station directly. Norris' face was set. He began profuse apologies:

"Just a minute," he mumbled, "got to—locate some papers. Let me see—" He was fidgeting with a leather pocket in the door of the roadster, then about the seat cushions and the floor of the automobile.

Before she knew it (how quickly the whole thing had happened!) Connie Marsh found herself back in the roadster. Norris was beside her and the motor was fairly flying through the night.

For awhile the man did not speak. Connie couldn't talk either. What was there anyhow for her to say?

A short laugh.

"Pretty dumb, huh?" The young man's face had relaxed. It was pale though. Apparently he was beginning to feel relieved.

"Gee, I'm sorry about this, Connie. Makes me feel cheap! You see it's—business. I haven't got that stuff here with me so I've just got to get back to Monroe Junction and locate it. Of all times to have anything like that happen——"

"What—was it?" Connie asked timidly. She was a litle uncertain about this young man.

He hesitated barely an instant.

"Oh—papers! Just some papers. Wouldn't mean much to anybody else, see, but I'm supposed

to look after 'em. That's the reason for the rush. Gee, I never expected to pull such a dumb trick!"

In just about one half the time it had taken to drive to Morristown the roadster was back in Monroe Junction. Norris hadn't said much all the way. Connie couldn't talk either because she sensed vaguely that something was wrong—or in danger of going wrong.

She couldn't understand it in the least. As far as Gene Norris was concerned it seemed she might as well have been at the North Pole!

Connie didn't like that. She was accustomed to being the center of the scene.

How could silly old business papers be so important?

They reached the Marsh home on Ninth Street and Norris pulled the roadster to the curb.

"Well," he said, "this has been a disappointing evening. I'm awfully sorry, Connie. Gee, I hope you understand—" Then hurrying on, "you'll have to let me make it up some other time. Some other evening. You will, won't you?"

A note of wistfulness helped out the plea.

"Why—why yes. Of course."

"Maybe I won't be around town tomorrow, Connie. May have to make a little business trip. But I'll be back, Kid. Don't forget that. Well, so long. Good night!"

The roadster was gone.

Connie Marsh stared in the distance in which the tearing motor car had disappeared. What a way to go! Just drive off without—well, hardly anything. Then she laughed, a little choking

laugh. It didn't have a very pleasant sound.

Oh, of COURSE he would be like that!

What did Gene Norris care for a girl like her? What had last night's kisses meant to him?

Connie scolded herself. Oh yes, she'd known better. City men who stopped over in small towns once in a while were always like that. If they had time to kid a girl along, play around with her, steal a few kisses—all right.

The minute they were gone it was forgotten.

Connie Marsh wasn't afraid she'd never see Gene Norris again. She wasn't thinking about that. Oh, no! What troubled her was the perfectly evident fact that she'd been made to appear a fool.

An uncomfortable observation for any person!

Bob Knight would never have treated a girl that way. Connie Marsh felt a great warming in her heart toward Bob Knight. Then she remembered what she had done to Bob that very evening.

Connie walked up to the porch and went into the house.

Every so often men and women who go regularly to church hear sermons based upon "the powers of influence." So, for that matter do persons who listen to lecturers. Even those uncounted thousands who read the philosophical paragraphs conducted by celebrities in the daily newspapers have been instructed in the powers of influence.

Just how much influence upon Constance Marsh's subsequent conduct that night's drive to Morristown had is speculation. Connie's conduct however was quite definite.

It was Sunday evening, five days later. She and Bob Knight were sitting in the porch swing before Connie's home.

The swing moved ever so slightly backward and forward, backward and forth. The western sky was flaming with a purple and rose sunset. A breeze lifted a tawny tendril of Connie's hair and conveyed it against Bob's cheek.

The youth's brawny hand closed over Connie's. The porch swing swayed and stopped.

"Connie," whispered Bob Knight huskily, "won't you say 'yes' this time?"

Connie raised her eyes to those eager, intent blue ones. Oh, there was nobody like Bob Knight. Nobody in the world. Bob was a dear, a person to cling to, to steady yourself by when everything else was mixed up and going round.

She hadn't seen Gene Norris in five days.

"Couldn't you marry me, honey?" the boy's voice persisted.

"I think," the girl trembled slightly, "I think Bob—yes."

She said it just as though she thought it settled the subject.

CHAPTER V

WHERE WAS CONNIE?

For two weeks Connie Marsh had experimented with the sensations of being an "engaged girl." She found she liked it.

Every morning in that blissful stage of half-wakefulness, half-sleepiness preceding any ambitious attempt to arise from bed Connie would gaze through half-closed eyelids at the pert black and white Pierrot doll perched on her dressing table and say to him, "WE know something!"

Something at last was going to happen in Monroe Junction.

The Pierrot doll and Maxine Fisher were the only ones to whom Connie had confided the secret. She wouldn't let Bob—on penalty of postponing the wedding date—speak to her parents about it. The marriage was set indefinitely for "after Christmas."

There was going to be a honeymoon trip to New York!

The nicest thing about it, Connie told herself, was that calm, comfortable feeling. It surely showed she was ready to marry and settle down. She'd never wanted anything like that before—not for longer than it took to think up a new thrill.

"Isn't it queer," she said to Maxine, straightening the seam of the cobwebby bit of silk hose

and adjusting a pair of emerald and ivory garters, "isn't it queer how I suddenly realized that I wanted to marry Bob? Because all these years we've played around together somehow I never seemed to want to MARRY him. Isn't that queer?"

"Oh, I don't know. Bob's—well, I don't know. I think most girls would be pretty wild to marry Bob." Maxine colored as she said it but Connie failed to notice that.

"But I'm NOT wild about it. Not in the least. I feel just as calm and—well, sure about what I'm doing. And I think that's the best way. Don't you, Maxine? It means using your head instead of doing some wild, crazy stunt. Of course I know I've done plenty of crazy things too, but I'm all over that now."

Maxine nodded in agreement. The girls were in Connie's room and Maxine sat at the dressing table dabbing pink stuff on her nails and polishing them while she waited for Connie to dress. Putting on two and one half garments could sometimes take Connie Marsh a very long while. She was clad in the "half" just then. It couldn't possibly have weighed more than three ounces.

"Yes, you've done some wild things." Maxine went on after a minute. "You remember that night out at 'Roseland,' the time you went off with that stranger? I didn't think Bob would get over that!"

Connie couldn't answer. She was concentrating in the arrangement of a ribbon shoulder strap.

"You know, Connie," Maxine continued, "I

sometimes thought you were sort of interested in that fellow——"

"Interested! I hate him!"

Surprising vehemence Maxine studied her nails a minute before going on.

"Well, you saw him after that, didn't you?"

"Why, I ran into him once or twice. Couldn't very well keep him off the streets, could I? I had to speak,"

"You know though," persisted Maxine, "I thought he was just about the best looking fellow that's struck this town in years. What did he come here for?"

"How should I know?"

There wasn't any more of that. Connie made a pretense of diving down for a shoe horn which she really didn't need in the least. Her cheeks had suddenly taken on a glow. She couldn't help remembering that only last night Gene Norris HAD told her why he had come back to Monroe Junction. The explanation was intensely personal and involved Miss Constance Marsh. It had been the first time she had seen Norris since their drive to Morristown.

Connie's reply last night had been cool.

Maxine launched a discussion of the way Susan Robinson was fixing her bob during that awful period of letting it grow long. Presently Connie interrupted.

"Maxine—I suppose we'll have to tell people about the engagement pretty soon. It makes things—sort of difficult."

"How do you mean?"

"Well—with other fellows for instance. 'Course

I haven't gone around with anyone except Bob the last two weeks but some of the others keep asking for dates. Why—can you imagine it?—even that Norris you mentioned!"

"But you wouldn't go with him!"

"Oh no, of COURSE not!"

"You wouldn't want to since you're so sure you don't like him!"

"That's it—and of course being loyal to Bob and everything."

Maxine Fisher was plainly interested in the turn of the conversation. Maxine was Connie's best friend but she could never claim for herself the wide spread popularity that was Connie's. She was a clever girl though, very clever. Bob Knight somehow had just never seemed to see her because of Connie.

"Well," said Maxine, "I'm not really so terribly certain about THAT."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't think it's so much a test of loyalty to Bob to stay away from other fellows as it might be to go around with them some."

"You mean——"

"Don't you see? If you wanted to prove to yourself that you aren't interested in anybody else except Bob you'll have to try it out and be sure. Of course I wasn't thinking about Gene Norris—but the rest of the fellows. Don't you see? A regular loyalty test!"

"Oh, but Bob wouldn't like that."

"I don't see how he could object if you told him—afterward."

"Yes, I suppose I could——"

* * * * * * *

Mr. Marsh sat reading his evening paper and complained to his wife that something ought to be done about these hold-ups.

"You know it's getting fierce!" the righteous man insisted. "Why, it's awful! I see they've got detectives still looking for the fellows that pulled off that Francis Hotel robbery in Chicago last month. But they won't find them. Never do. The way these outlaws have got things organized is a fright! They can get away with anything. Decent people don't dare show themselves on the streets."

"That's one thing about big cities," Mrs. Marsh agreed comfortably. "Here in Monroe Junction we needn't worry. Just what I'm always telling Connie, but you can't convince HER."

"Where is Connie tonight?"

"She said she'd be right home after the show. Ought to be here now. It's after 9 o'clock."

It should be explained here that it was not economic necessity which sent Connie Marsh twice daily to sell tickets at the Bijou Theater. That is, not in the strictest sense. Mr. and Mrs. Marsh would have preferred to have their daughter remain at home.

Girls just didn't seem to be content to live the way they used to, though. Connie had everything she wanted—or should have wanted—bought for her by her father's purse. Connie had found her job and worked at it for three months now (ever since finishing high school) because it was her hope of the means to leave Monroe Junction.

"She should be here," her mother repeated.

Mrs. Marsh would have been many times firmer

in that contention if she could have seen her daughter just then.

Bob Knight would have held similar convictions. Connie was engaged in such a queer way of "proving her loyalty to Bob."

* * * * * * *

There were no lights along the highway or in the sky to brighten the road. There was the moon. Only the most dazzling, twinkling stars cast down their silvered radiance. There were no lights either in the car.

Crushed and silent in the man's arms, Connie Marsh lay still. The arms were not Bob's.

Neither were those lips, pressed down upon Connie's so ruthlessly, so relentlessly, so maddeningly! No, they weren't Bob's lips, nor Bob's kisses. Nothing like Bob's kisses! They were mad, swift, feverish and god-like, all of them. They bathed Connie's spirit in a radiant white glow. They routed resistance. They took Connie Marsh and left her helpless.

The girl made the slightest perceptible motion, pushing a damp, copperish curl back from her cheek.

Gene Norris drew back, looked at her. There were things inexpressible in that gaze which Connie Marsh failed to read.

"Ooh!" breathed Connie. "Ooh!"

She put a hand up against his cheek. The cheek felt warm. So did the hand.

"Connie—Connie—do you care?"

For two weeks she had told herself repeatedly that she hated this man. HATED him! He was the sort to make love to a girl, tell her a lot of

pretty lies and then disappear. Most of all she hated Gene Norris for the way he had kissed her. Connie couldn't forget that.

Tonight though, the very sight of Gene Norris had clutched at her heart. She had gone for this ride. It was to be "just a little one."

"Connie, do you CARE?" the man insisted. "Oh, don't answer me—let me go on and talk. God, girl, do you think I don't know I haven't got the right to ask you? You think I don't KNOW? Why, I haven't even got the right to be here! You haven't seen me for two weeks. Do you know why? Because I MADE myself stay away. I had to. I had to make myself stay away or—have you.

"Yesterday I couldn't stand going without the sight of you any longer. I had to come back here. I HAD TO. Even if they get me for it. Hear that? Even if they get me. Maybe they will too—but not if things work out right. Listen, Connie, do you think a fellow's who's nothing but a bum, just a bum, could ever have a chance —if he put everything behind him—all of it? Lit out for California or some place and made a new start? I could do that with you, Kid. God, I'm just crazy about you! Have been ever since that first night I kissed you. Maybe I'm crazy now. I can't help it. Oh, Connie——"

The words broke off. He meant it all so desperately!

Connie Marsh's lips raised and touched his.

At 4 a. m. of a chilly grayish September morning a sleepy justice of the peace across the Union county border pronounced Constance Marsh and Eugene Norris man and wife.

CHAPTER VI

BREAKFAST FOR TWO

Connie awoke with a start and looked at the man across the room. Gene—but how could it be? She clutched the covers and blinked her eyes.

Why, of course! She remembered all about it.

Norris' back was toward her. The gray coat was hanging over the back of a chair. His shirt sleeves were rolled up. What a splendid figure Gene had.

And this was her husband.

"Gene, dear," a sleepy voice drawled, "come kiss me."

"Darling——"

He had gathered her into his arms. Connie's head found that comfortable place on the sturdy shoulder. Two crystal tear globules poised on a starry lash.

"Connie—you aren't sorry?"

"No, Gene—no, I'm GLAD! Kiss me, Gene!"

He held her closely, tenderly, caressing the soft little shoulders, patting her arms, touching his lips breath-takingly to the tawny locks above her ear. After all, Connie was such a little thing. She looked like a precious youngster. She needed protection. He held her closer to him.

"And you're never going to be sorry for this, darling," Gene was assuring her. "You're never going to be sorry. Connie, you're the first

person in all the world that's been willing to take a chance on me. I'm going to make you happy too! Before God I'm going to——"

"But Gene—I'm happy NOW!"

"Sweetheart! I don't see how anybody could be much happier than we are. Do you?"

Connie didn't say a word. She told him in her own way, in the depths of those gorgeous blue eyes, that she was the happiest, the very happiest girl in all the world.

Gene believed her.

There were important subjects on which Gene Norris had intended to discourse just then but somehow none of them got attention. None of them even got mentioned.

After a while Connie remembered something.

"What time is it?" she asked.

Gene twisted his wrist so that he could see the watch dial.

"'Bout 2:30."

"Two-thirty! Why, for goodness sakes! And I'm not even UP yet! Isn't that terrible? Oh Gene—such a lazy wife!"

He evidently didn't think she was in the least bit terrible. They settled the argument thoroughly.

Ten hours before this, in fact as soon as the marriage fee had been paid she and Gene had returned to the roadster. How that car could go! They skimmed headlong over highways without the slightest regard for traffic ordinances.

The motion of the motor car had been enough to lull Connie into sleep. She was really very sleepy. Gene seemed to be a wonder at knowing

the roads. The car was heavy and took the ruts smoothly.

By 7:30 a. m. they had arrived at Dennison, a city of about 75,000 population 200 miles from Monroe Junction.

The hotel which Gene found was the best in the town. Yes, there was a room for them. And with what a flourish the young man wrote upon the register:

"Mr. and Mrs. Gene Norris."

He hesitated an instant, then added as their residence, "Los Angeles, California."

"Where we're bound for Honey?" he whispered to the bride. "That's going to be our home, you know."

Well, all that had happened hours ago.

Connie rubbed her eyes and tried to convince herself that now it was really afternoon. She couldn't believe it at first. Gene evidently had been about for quite a while. He didn't look sleepy either.

She'd have to hurry to get dressed. There were a lot of things to see about.

Somehow though, Connie just couldn't hurry! It still was new and wonderful to think of all that twenty-four hours had done.

Very gradually it began to occur to Connie that there were other people in the world. For instance, her parents!

"Gene," she said, "what are we going to do about—Mother and Dad?"

"Oh that's all right, Darling. I thought about it. While ago when I went out I sent them a telegram. Here—see what I said——"

He held out toward her a yellow slip of paper upon which was written:

"Married this morning to Eugene Norris by Justice Riley in Union County. Very happy. Please give blessing.

"Letter follows. Love—Connie."

"Think that's all right?"

"Of course it's all right. I'm glad you did it for me, Gene. I'd never have known how to say it myself. When are we going back to Monroe Junction, Gene?"

The youth's face became serious.

"Connie—would it make—would it make so terribly much difference to you if we didn't go back for a while? Course we haven't planned any regular honeymoon but, I'll tell you, I'd really like awfully well to get started for California. After we've been out there, say three or four months, I'll swear that you can come back to Monroe Junction—and I'll come with you too—and we can see your folks and the rest of 'em. That's why I got that wire off. So they'd know you're all right. And you can write them a long letter and tell them all about it. Do you think—would that be all right?"

"You mean—not see Mother or Dad or ANYBODY for three months?"

He nodded his head. "That's what I mean."

Connie hadn't bargained for it. She hadn't bargained for anything, in fact, for this mad marriage of her's. Just flown at the whole thing in an instant's impulse.

Her face clouded and then it brightened like sunshine.

"But we'll be together every minute, won't we, Gene?"

"Every minute, dear."

"Then of course it's all right."

The only possible way to improve upon the general course of existence just then, so Gene Norris decided, would be to order some breakfast.

"Breakfast—at 3 o'clock in the afternoon?"

"Why sure. You're hungry, aren't you?"

Connie considered. Yes, she guessed she was hungry. She hadn't realized that fact but it was true all right.

They had the food sent to their room. (Such elegance!) And Gene proved he know how to do the thing up properly too. It was as sumptuous a wedding breakfast as two young things, each too happy to realize what they might be eating, ever have sat down before.

First there was grapefruit, followed by fried chicken and mushrooms, hot biscuit with honey, a few detours along the way of stuffed celery and olives and salad. Then a frozen dessert—and very good too!

Yes, it was a marvelous breakfast. And served just for two!

Connie became serious as she was finishing her coffee. She looked up at Gene. (No, he wasn't seated across the table. Their chairs were close beside each other.)

"Do you know, Gene," said Connie shaking her head ruefully, "I'm—I'm a dreadful girl!"

She could say the most ridiculous things.

"But I am, dear. I really am and I'm so ashamed of it."

She told him about Bob Knight to whom she

had been engaged. It really was dreadful to think how she had treated Bob.

"I'll have to write him a letter too. Yes, a long letter. Bob'll forgive me all right. He always does. Bob's—a peach!"

No response whatever from the man beside her. Connie didn't notice until the silence had become actually chilling.

"Why—Gene—what's the matter?" she asked.

"Maybe you should have married him, Connie."

"Married—why, what do you mean?"

"That other guy." Gene indicated clearly with a shifting shoulder that the other guy he meant was Bob Knight. He went on:

"Sure, maybe you ought to have married him. He's the kind of a guy for you. Hard working, been to college, got money. Connie, don't you know you—you took an awful chance on me?"

"Why Gene, don't be silly! I don't love Bob. Don't you suppose I know who it is I wanted to marry? Didn't I choose you? Bob's been asking me to marry him for years—and oh, I don't know—it was just a sort of moment of weakness that I said I would, I guess. I wouldn't have gone through with it."

But Gene didn't seem to hear.

"I've got to tell you something," he said. "I've got to tell you——"

"Now, Gene Norris. You aren't going to do anything of the kind. I won't listen to you."

She didn't intend to hear him belittle himself.

"No, but Connie you ought to know. You'll have to sometime. I've got to——"

Connie had clapped her fingers over her ears.

"I won't listen! I won't listen!" she insisted.

The waiter came in then to take the dishes and trays to the kitchen. Gene was helpless to proceed with what he had to say.

"Well—just one thing," he continued as the man bearing the piled-up tray stepped through the door. "You'll have to hear it all some day but I'll tell you this now, Mrs. Eugene Norris, and don't you forget. This boy, Eugene, is on the straight and narrow for life. Out west in California where we're going there won't be a harder working, steadier young fellow than your husband. You did it, Connie! Oh, you ARE wonderful!"

Connie had to remind him before so very long that her hair would be utterly ruined.

The plan they settled upon was for Gene to go out and see about the car and about gas and have it ready for them to leave the hotel at 7:30 o'clock. They would drive all night, feeling refreshed as they were, and stop next day for rest.

Gene pulled on his gray hat and after several delayed attempts actually got through the door.

Connie didn't like to be left alone there but she was patient in her waiting. She was patient for one whole hour. Then it began to be strange, mysterious. Why was Gene gone so long? Why didn't he hurry back? How could he possibly take more than half that time to get the car?

She began drumming on the window pane, pacing the floor. She was beside herself.

There he was!

She heard footsteps, the knock at the door. Face alight with smiles, Connie sprang to open it.

She fell back!

Sullenly between two officers stood Gene Norris. And on his wrists—HANDCUFFS!

CHAPTER VII

CURLY'S STORY

CURLY NORTON, introduced into almost any set of young people in the country would have made an immediate impression—favorably.

He had good looks—broad shoulders, an athletic build, an infectious grin, brown eyes that weren't afraid of looking at you and dark curling hair clipped rather short.

He dressed well.

He certainly had "been around" and knew the world, surprisingly!

Curly Norton, in fact, considered himself riding on the high waves to success. He had never been arrested or stepped within a prison cell, he had youth, a fund of optimism and a bank account running into five figures.

Not so bad, was it, for a young fellow twenty-two years old?

Curly seldom thought of himself as a thief. For the matter of that, practically everyone he knew, men or women, were thieves—in a sense. Either they belonged to Mike's gang or to Tony's. Or else they were "dicks." "Dicks" were the avowed enemy of all his friends.

A few like "the Lone Kid" went it singly and pulled their jobs without assistance. Curly Norton was inclined to be more sociable. He had drifted into Mike's gang.

Ask Curly how it happened? He couldn't tell you.

When a boy shifts for himself in city streets at the age of ten he seldom joins the "Boy Scouts."

That curly head of hair may have had something to do with it. When Eugene Norton was first called "Curly" he bloodied a bigger boy's nose. After he found he couldn't help himself in accepting the nickname he did other things to make it quite clear that those curls did not mean he was a sissy.

In Mahan's saloon Curly happened to catch the eye of "Speed" Harney. "Speed" thought Curly was a bright kid. Curly was. He found that by making himself handy to Harney he could get three square meals a day and quite frequently spending money.

There was no one to point out to fourteen-year-old Curly Norton that an honest life, offering food only every so frequently, is to be preferred to aligning himself with outlaws and eating regularly. Not to mention sleeping under a roof.

Harney was decently considerate of the boy.

When "Speed" Harney was "bumped off" by a policeman's bullet trying to escape from the scene of looted box cars Curly considered he had lost his only real friend.

Harney was not alone in losing his life in that encounter. There were also two railroad employees killed.

"Swift justice" was the general comment of the day upon Harney's death.

It didn't seem that way to Curly, though. Curly missed Harney. The "dicks" had killed

him. They would as unhesitatingly fire on Curly himself if they caught him on the job as a look-out.

That was how Curly was first employed by the gang dominated by Mike Andrews. He had been hanging on with Mike since he was nineteen—three years! Curly was a general all-around assistant. He was a youngster, comparatively quiet, and especially useful because his face was not in the rogue's gallery. Nobody had taken Curly Norton's fingerprints. Strictly according to the letter of the law he had never done anything to warrant that.

It was unfortunate, of course, that things failed to go right in the big hotel robbery in Chicago. The thing was so spectacular, so impossible sounding that it should have been easy. Curly was there beside Mike. There were three others on the job.

In the street "Frisco Pete" was waiting in a closed blue limousine. The car could do ninety miles.

Mike and the other boys reached the car. Curly cut off through a side street. A bullet clipped over one shoulder blade. It barely missed.

Curly reached a taxi.

He stayed out of the city for ten days. Those were his instructions. By means of the underground communication system Curly got his orders regularly and he followed them. The "dicks" were showing surprising persistence on the hotel case.

Curly headed for Monroe Junction. The roadster was a good car. An allied garage keeper had loaned it to him.

There, in Monroe Junction, he found Connie Marsh.

Connie changed everything in the world.

The girls who had been in young Curly Norton's life were nothing like Connie. Nothing whatever. Most of them were pretty casual companions. Curly was too level-headed to get mixed up with women. Hadn't he seen what women had done to "Frisco Pete?" Women, mostly, were the bunk.

Oh, but not Connie!

It was a devilish situation. Connie Marsh was so cute and sweet and frank—and honest. There were things that called for quick head-work. For instance, she wanted to know his name. At the one time in the world when Norton should have gone nameless he met this girl who wanted to know his name. And moreover he wanted to tell it to her too!

He compromised. Instead of saying his name was Norton he made it Norris. A ridiculous thing to do. He could have at least made it "Oppenheimer" or "MacDermit" or "Delaney." But Curly didn't want to tell her lies like that. He wanted to tell Connie the truth.

When he realized completely what this meant Curly Norton went away.

He couldn't stand that either, Norton faced the horrible dilemma of wanting to go straight!

At first he wouldn't believe it. He told himself repeatedly that it was only the girl. Just a little red-head in a hick town who somehow he couldn't forget. If he could have Connie that was all he wanted.

But to have Connie he HAD to go straight.

The night of their whirlwind marriage he had intended to make a clean breast of things, tell it all to the girl (as much as he dared without giving away the rest of the gang) and let Connie decide. It wasn't fair to do otherwise.

Well—it hadn't turned out the way he figured it.

If you are inclined to judge Norton severely (as of course he should be judged) remember however that for years he had been in the habit of comfortably following the easiest course.

Curly was still bewildered about himself. He had plans—they were hazy—for reformation on the Pacific Coast. That would be far enough away from the gang so that he would have a chance. And he could get there all right because he had the car.

Most amazingly, with Connie beside him he WANTED to go straight.

Some of these things were certainly in Eugene Norton's thoughts as he stood in the doorway that evening, grappled on each side by an officer, his wrists clamped together by the steel chains.

First of all they had to do something for Connie.

Shock, excitement, lack of sleep—the combination of all these—had overcome her. Connie stared just one moment, saw those chains, swayed and fell forward.

Norton couldn't catch her—there were those handcuffs!

But one of the officers was quick at assistance. Connie awakened to realize she was propped up in a chair and that the horrible nightmare which had come over her seemed to be real.

"Wh-wh-what's HAPPENED?"

From a handsome, smiling young man her husband had been transformed into sullen hopelessness.

There was no smile on his face now.

"Connie—are you all right? Are you sure?"

One of the other men wanted to hand Connie a glass of water.

"I won't take it. I don't want it. What are you doing to—to Gene?"

"Sorry, Ma'am. Guess you'll have to come along with us. No more nonsense now or playing faints. Hurry up—get ready!"

Again she made a wordless plea to Gene.

The torture that looked out at her from his brown eyes was unendurable. Connie hadn't the least notion what was happening around her but she knew it was something terrible and calamitous.

"Gene!" she begged, "tell me what's happened?"

Whatever he may have started to say was interrupted by the man in the dark suit.

"Enough of that now, young lady. We've had enough of that! Plenty of time ahead for talking. And no bluffs, see! There are a few things we're waiting to hear too. Get on your hat, girl. It's a couple of blocks to the jail."

And as he said that last word, Gene turned on him.

"Listen, you're not going to take HER! You haven't got——"

"Never mind what I haven't got. Never mind! 'Course I'm going to take her along."

"But, listen. She doesn't—Listen, I'll tell you ANYTHING if you'll send her home to her folks. Over at Monroe Junction. Everything, I tell you. I'll confess——"

"Oh yes, I know you will. I've known that all the time. But not on any bargain like that. No sir. We need the young lady. We need her. Now, there's nobody going to harm you, Sister. Nobody at all. Just put your hat on and pick up your things and come along. It's time we was movin'!"

So it happened that Connie Marsh Norton, sitting in an uncomfortable little gray room in the Dennison county jail learned for the first time from newspaper headlines that her husband, Gene Norris, was known elsewhere as Curly Norton, gangster.

There was a pleasant faced police matron who brought Connie's supper on a tray.

Connie couldn't eat anything.

She didn't know what the matron said to her. The girl lay in a little heap on the none too white counterpane of a tiny cot and cried and cried and cried.

Where was Gene?

What would they do to him?

What had he done? Why, oh why had all this terrible mistake come about? Of course Gene couldn't be guilty. Of COURSE he couldn't be. Why didn't they listen to her when she tried to tell them?

Hysteria sent her into convulsive sobs again.

"Mrs. Norton—you shouldn't—you ought not —" It was the voice of the police matron trying

to soothe her. Connie didn't want to be soothed. She hated every one of them. They were keeping her from Gene.

So she cried and cried on, kicking her little slippered toes into the surface of the bed coverings and none of that performance did any good in the least.

She had quieted momentarily when a man who was evidently the jailer stepped in front of the bars.

"Mrs. Norton is to come with me," the man said.

CHAPTER VIII

DARK DAYS

The facts about Connie Norton's life during the next days will have to be taken from the records chiefly. The girl couldn't remember what happened any more than she knew much of the time what was going on around her or whether this bitter drama into which she found herself plunged, might lead.

When the guard brought her to a room where Sheriff Bennett and two other men sat she looked into their faces, vaguely wondering what they would say to her.

"You're—you're Mrs. Norton, aren't you?"

Connie nodded.

All of the men believed the red-haired girl to be Norton's accomplice. If she wanted to be known as Mrs. Norton, well—of course—all right. They'd landed a cagey guy and were going to get the goods on him.

"Sit over there, please."

Connie sat in the chair indicated.

"Now, Mrs. Norton, you know the simplest way is for you to tell us the facts—all the facts You might as well know that Curly's confessed——"

"Confessed? Oh no, no, no——!"

It was the terrible moment of half-belief that Curly might be guilty of some wrong. The girl's

face was horror stricken. The sheriff and detectives had their own interpretation for that look.

"Yep. Confessed. It's the best way for him. Get an easier sentence. Now——"

She interrupted him.

"You don't mean—you don't mean Gene's CONFESSED anything?"

"Oh yes, I do. Oh yes! We have a full confession of the hotel robbery and——"

Sheriff Bennett's voice went on but Connie failed to hear the words. She was at grips with the most terrible torment she had ever known. No, no, it couldn't be—no, not Gene!

She gained control of herself again. She wanted to do something. She wanted action. Connie turned on the sheriff savagely:

"But Gene didn't DO anything wrong!" she insisted. "He didn't do anything——"

All in all the girl couldn't be called a very satisfactory witness. They had even tried a touch of the third degree without results.

What handicapped the officers particularly was that they did not have Norton's confession. They had been working for it. Detectives were grilling him at the time. But Gene refused to talk.

It had seemed easy. Mike Andrews and two others (taken four days before in Chicago) were safely locked away. It was by means of what Andrews had said, trying to save his skin, by means of a clever Union county sheriff and by means of Norton's telegraph to Connie's parents that the pair had been traced to Dennison.

Now Dennison's police force was doing what it could pending arrival of officers from Chicago.

The attempt had not been successful. They hadn't expected to have much trouble with Norton. They had hoped to get a lot from him about other members of Mike's gang.

In that they were wrong.

Gene had been willing enough, as he said, to confess at least a part of his iniquities when he begged the Sheriff to send Connie home.

Since then he had turned surly. And for other reasons too. Norton felt the savage reaction of the hunted creature at bay with the pack closing in.

He had wanted to go straight, tried to, tasted the highest happiness attainable by man and then —fallen to this. Gene Norton reacted like the outcast he felt he was. They were going to have to fight to get his scalp.

Connie went back to her quarters. There was no mirror near to reveal to the girl how she looked but her face was almost unrecognizable. Feverish, swollen eyes, tear-stained cheeks and disarranged hair. Even pretty features can hardly redeem these. There was panic written in the blue eyes and suffering in the mouth.

At 9 o'clock the guard appeared to announce that someone had come to see Connie.

"Who is it?" Connie asked.

"Man from the News-Press. Wants to talk to you."

"But I don't want to talk to anyone. I don't want to see him."

Apparently that point of view made little impression upon the jailer. He had been there for years. Some of the newspapers boys were good fellows—including the man now waiting outside.

There was an important case anyhow. It couldn't hurt the girl. She'd have to talk sometime.

"Better come with me," the jailer said and Connie helplessly did as she was told.

The man in the little room they entered didn't look harmful. He had friendly eyes and a nice smile. But what business had people to smile when everything was all so terrible? What business had they?

"How do you do, Mrs. Norton. My name is Jamieson. From the News-Press. There were just a few things I wanted to talk to you about——"

Connie had found herself at last.

"I haven't anything to say," she interrupted him hastily.

"Oh but now, listen. I just wanted to know——"

All of his talking was without effect. Connie held to her guns. She remained silent.

Then she realized suddenly that something else was happening here. Jamieson had pulled from his pocket a small tin affair, he was pouring powder into it, was focusing a camera on her.

Flash! A stream of smoke rolled slowly through the air.

"Did you—did you take my picture?" she gasped.

"Sorry, Mrs. Norton. Orders from my office. I had to. Perhaps you'd rather fix your hair up a little bit and pose and let me try another one. Probably get a better picture that way."

No, Connie didn't want another picture taken. She knew that the one he had snapped would be

horrible. What of it? To have her picture in the paper—like that!

She saw it next morning and cried as she read the headlines:

CURLY NORTON AND PRETTY
BRIDE MUST FACE CHARGES

Below was the flashlight photograph showing anything but a "pretty bride." It didn't look like Connie but she knew it was the picture taken the night before.

It never helps a girl in heart-breaking circumstances to realize she has lost her looks.

Breakfast was brought to her but she barely nibbled the toast. The coffee was scarcely warm.

"Mrs. Morgan," she said to the matron, "aren't they going to let me see Gene today?"

The woman shook her head.

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Norton. I'm afraid they can't do that just now. But it won't be for so much longer now. You'll see him pretty soon. Just try to be cheerful, dear. Wait—I'm going to get you some fresh coffee. That you've got there's stone cold."

The matron had no particular hope that Connie would be permitted to talk to Gene soon but she always tried to comfort girls! This one seemed like a nice little thing too. It certainly was too bad! This modern generation——

An hour later another caller was announced for Connie.

"It's a woman this time, Miss. Shall I bring her in here?"

The girl agreed with a nod. She had no interest in whom it might be.

A well dressed, smiling young woman wearing a dark suit and red hat followed the guard down the hall. When he opened the cell door she stepped through, smiled a bit uncertainly at Connie, then held out her hand.

Dazed and wondering, Connie took it.

"I'm Rose Carter—from the Chicago newspaper. I'm glad to see you, Mrs. Norton."

The newspapers again! Connie recoiled at the thought.

"I don't—there isn't—anything I want to say."

"Oh yes, there is. Lots!" Miss Carter smiled back at her easily. "Do you mind if I set down here?" She took the one chair in the small compartment.

Connie sat down on the cot. She continued to gaze at this stranger.

"Oh yes, there is," Miss Carter continued. "Don't you know, my dear, that you can save your husband?"

"Save my husband—why, how?"

"I'll tell you. Listen honey, don't you know that there's nothing like a woman's loyalty to help a man? Maybe you never noticed it but over and over in the newspaper business we see it. A man on trial not only faces the jury in the courtroom but the jury of public opinion as well. And if a man's wife really believes in him the public will."

"You mean—I could help Gene?"

"Why certainly. That's what I'm here for. To get your story for my paper and to help you save your husband. We'll call this interview

'Why I'm True to My Bandit Husband——' ''

"But HE ISN'T a bandit!"

"That's right. That's the stuff—stand by him! Now tell me all about it. When did you first meet Gene Norton?"

There was no doubt about the skill of Rose Carter as an interviewer. After three-quarters of an hour she had elicited from Connie an amount of sobs and heart-throbs which could easily (with a little repetition and padding) be made into six daily installments of an article entitled:

"MY OWN TRUE STORY OF HOW I MET AND WED MY BANDIT LOVER"
BY CONSTANCE NORTON

The fact that the couple had been married by the justice of the peace in Union County and bits of Connie's former life in Monroe Junction had been flashed to Chicago the night before with announcement of Norton's arrest.

It made what the city editor called a "wow" of a yarn and Miss Carter was equal to it. The pictures carried with the articles were procured by devious means from Monroe Junction. They showed Connie at her loveliest. Particularly that large portrait taken just before high school graduation when Connie starred in the class play. There were some kodak pictures taken on a picnic which looked awfully silly.

The climax of the day came at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Connie had been sitting on the little cot, staring at the opposite wall just as she had sat for hours. Mrs. Morgan entered.

"Mrs. Norton—" the woman said, hesitating, It's—your mother and father."

The girl never forgot that meeting. It was the sort of thing that refuses to be set down in cold black and white. Connie clung to her father's arms. Her mother at the same time was embracing her. All of them wept.

"We'll get you away from all this," Mr. Marsh said thickly.

"But Father. I can't leave—Gene! I'm—MARRIED to him."

The father's voice broke.

"No, Connie," he said to her, "you aren't—married."

CHAPTER IX

SEALED LIPS

"But, Father——"

Alexander Marsh may have been ruthless but where is the father living who could go through all the tortures of the damned as he had for forty-eight hours and do otherwise? His little girl, here in his arms—his only child—was in great danger, the victim of a scalawag!

Mrs. Marsh's quiet sobbing continued. Connie was panic-stricken. Then Alexander Marsh spoke:

"You—aren't married, Connie," he said. "Marriage is a holy sacrament. That—what happened the other night—profanes the very thought of marriage. You didn't know the man. Didn't even know his real name. Oh, there are plenty of grounds for annulment. I've brought Jim Guthrie with me——"

Guthrie was a lawyer from Monroe Junction.

"But, Father. We were—I AM married! Don't you understand? Oh, don't you see there's been some terrible mistake! Gene didn't do anything wrong. I know he didn't. And Gene's—my husband!"

"No, Connie. No. This—farce—is going to be annulled."

"Father, Father dear, what makes you——"

The interview failed to reach a satisfactory

conclusion. Through it Mrs. Marsh cried piteously, kissing her daughter's cheeks, patting her shoulders, and stopping occasionally to wipe her eyes. Alexander Marsh was determined to make his daughter listen to reason. Connie was bewildered by this new disaster.

"I AM married," she kept repeating over and over, "I AM married."

Finally Mr. Marsh decided to leave and come back later with Jim Guthrie. Connie's mother stayed with the girl.

The evening meal was brought in on a tray. When Mrs. Marsh saw the fare set before her daughter she seemed to consider this new grounds for tears. Poor Mrs. Marsh! She had long before ceased to look for reason in what was going on around her. That anyone should offer her daughter cold potatoes, greasy pork chops and bread pudding!

The food looked worse to Mrs. Marsh than it was really.

There was another session with officers of the law for Connie that evening—this time with detectives who had arrived from Chicago.

Connie stood it as long as she could, then broke into hysterical sobbing. They led her away from the room.

Though she loved her mother and father she felt a sense of relief when she returned and saw that the tiny space which was hers was unoccupied. Somehow all Connie wanted was to be alone in the dark, to try to unravel the perplexing skeins fate had wound around her. If she could only see Gene——

She thought bitterly of that night such a little

while before and cried herself to sleep! Such a honeymoon!

Jim Guthrie came in the morning with Mr. Marsh and talked to Connie. He was business-like—not at all emotional or frightening as almost everyone else was.

It was rather comforting to listen to Mr. Guthrie talk. He seemed to take these strange proceedings of sheriffs and detectives and court orders as natural and nothing to be afraid of.

"You won't have to stay here much longer, Connie. We're going to get you out of this all right."

"But, Mr. Guthrie. What about Gene? Why won't they let me see him?"

"Oh, he's all right! Needn't worry about him. You can see him before long."

None of which pleased Connie's father in the least but the lawyer assured Mr. Marsh afterward there wasn't anything to be gained by having the girl sit there all day crying her eyes out.

Guthrie's further advice when he had given the situation a general survey and knew more about what lay before Gene Norton and his pretty bride was to let the question of the marriage rest.

"They're both of them of age," he counselled Alexander Marsh. "Your daughter's attitude wouldn't help any. If Norton's convicted—and I think he will be—divorce is simple. Oh now, I know! You don't like the word or the thought of it but it may be best. Give the girl time. Let her see how she's thrown her life away and things will go smoother. Your daughter might, well—there's no telling how the thing might affect her. And you're sure of one thing. She can't possibly

have any more to do with the fellow while he's locked up."

Mrs. Marsh was helpful.

She came in about 10:30 o'clock in the morning with arms full of packages containing comforting articles for Connie. There were the dressing table preparations which her daughter preferred. There were fresh garments. Mrs. Marsh persuaded the matron to let her go to the kitchen and prepare the breakfast coffee and toasted rolls just as Connie liked them.

Yes indeed, things picked up considerably with one's mother at hand!

It wasn't long before Connie was smitten with self-reproach for the way she had talked to her father. She told him she was sorry and the Marsh family held an amicable reunion.

Not all of James Guthrie's predictions came true.

He was unable to secure permission for Constance Marsh Norton to return to Monroe Junction. It developed that Connie as well as Norton was to be transported to Chicago and that the trial would open within three weeks or so. Connie was being held as a witness. Mrs. Marsh refused to leave her daughter.

Alexander Marsh and James Guthrie went back to Monroe Junction.

Connie and her mother prepared for the trip to Chicago. The girl was glad enough by this time to have Mrs. Marsh with her every day.

The thing she wanted most desperately still, was to see Gene. For now as days passed the girl had gained a glimmering of his predicament. She knew Gene Norton was to be tried for

attempting to rob the Chicago hotel. It was a terrible offense! Everybody seemed against Gene.

These were the days in which Connie realized that not one single fact about her husband's earlier life had he ever told her. There were those times when he had hinted and seemed to want to tell her something. She had always prevented him from doing so.

Connie gave it up. All that seemed possible was to wait, wait and see what coming days might bring.

There was one thing, though. If she could SEE Gene, look just once into those dark eyes, Connie knew that all the harrowing questioning in her soul would find an answer.

That time was coming.

* * * * * * *

Looking very slim and small, her face white against the somber blue of her coat and hat, Connie seated herself beside her mother in the train bound for Chicago. Only the tendrils of burnished copper escaping from beneath the hat and playing about her face, the red lips which owed their crimson to no imitation of nature, refused to be subdued.

She was a girl who might sway juries and Gene's defense counsel knew it.

One seat to the rear and at the opposite side of the car sat the deputy sheriff, carefully unobstrusive, whose duty it was to see that Connie reached her destination.

The girl gripped her mother's hand silently. Perhaps when the train started moving there

would not be so many staring faces watching her. The officials had been considerate. They could not however, control the inquisitive spirit of onlookers. Or perhaps there were not really so many inquisitive faces as the girl believed. It seemed to Connie the whole world was gaping at her.

The trip ended.

Cameramen buzzed about as Connie and her mother came down the steps of the car. There was no help for it! Of course they would snap pictures of her. She tried to put up a hand, protecting her face from one planted camera. As she did so, looking away in the opposite direction she realized that a small graphlex was being leveled directly toward her.

"Don't mind them, darling. Don't mind them!" her mother whispered, hurrying her daughter to a waiting cab. There was an attempted rush of one or two reporters trying to get to her. Officials held them off.

Connie looked out of the cab window. She wondered if she might see Gene anywhere about.

No. He was not in sight. She didn't know Gene's car was far down the yard.

* * * * * * *

Eventually Connie was permitted that interview.

All the girl knew about the matter was that after she had comfortably bathed and dressed and lay down for a short rest after lunch a messenger came saying she could see her husband.

"When?" Connie demanded eagerly.

"In about thirty minutes, I think. You can get ready now."

The girl was trembling from head to foot. So many days, so many nights! But this was what she had waited for. Now she was to KNOW!

A man in a dark uniform met her at the entrance way. He opened a barred gate through which Connie passed. She followed down the ominous corridor. The man paused, fumbled with a ring of keys and swung open a door.

Without a word Connie paused in the doorway.

She looked at the figure in the shadows. He looked at her—Gene—but so different!

"Hello—Gene," the girl faltered.

"Hello."

Why, how could he—how COULD he be changed so? Even his voice. The way he said things! The way he looked!

"G-G-Gene!" the treble voice quivered. "I've wanted to see you so long! They wouldn't let me come."

She had entered the cell room. The barred door clicked behind her.

"Yeh?"

"Oh Gene, you aren't—don't you CARE about seeing me? Didn't you want to? Gene—when I've prayed night and day for so long just to look at you! Don't you—don't you LOVE me any more?"

The young man answered not a single word. He shifted his head sideways, avoiding her eyes.

"Gene!"

"Yes?" he turned inquiringly.

"Come here—Gene."

Almost against his will, it seemed, the youth arose and took two sauntering steps toward her. The light from the cell window struck full across his features.

Connie Norton took one look at that face, fell crouching, sobbing back against the cot.

CHAPTER X

EXTRA! EXTRA!

"You—you didn't want to see me!" Connie moaned hopelessly. "Oh, Gene, you don't care any more. You don't CARE!"

Her face was hidden in her hands. Her figure swayed.

Gene Norton stood and looked down at her. There was misery written in the man's eyes. It might have been better—no, perhaps worse—if Connie had glanced up just then and read the thoughts behind that masked countenance.

At length Gene found his voice. It was a queer strained voice. It sounded far away and very uncertain. He turned his head sideways while he spoke.

"I guess you ought to know by now, Connie, I'm no good! You—ought to get out of this—as soon as you can. They haven't got anything on you! I'm sorry it's all happened. That is—I'm sorry for YOU. I don't care. It's in the game for me. Just in the game."

"Gene——"

She had glanced up quickly but he stopped her.

"Oh, I know. There isn't anything for you to say to me. Not a word. See? You and I are just—well, we don't even live in the same world, see? You can go back to Monroe Junction and forget about all this. They'll get you an annul-

ment or a divorce or something You can—you can forget me all right——"

He would have gone on but Connie broke in once more and this time he failed to stop her. Connie was on her feet, beside the man. She looked straight into those dark eyes. The look gave Norton something of a jolt but he gazed back squarely.

"Gene," the girl said to him, "do you want me to go?"

Whatever motive there maye have been behind the words (and who of us is to proclaim motives?) Gene Norton, known to his outlaw comrades as "Curly," looked for just one instant into the sapphire depths of his wife's eyes and answered:

"Yes!"

* * * * * * *

The Norton trial the day it opened crowded a European queen and an appropriation fight in the Senate chamber at Washington, D. C. from front page space in the evening newspapers.

It was like that all the way through.

Considering the fact that Curly Norton was a good looking, swagger youth believed to be intimately allied with powers higher up in the gang world—considering that Curly had a wife who was young, beautiful and appealingly loyal —considering that Norton's capture took place during this pair's honeymoon—venders of the daily news felt amply justified:

"Hux-tree! Hux-tree! All about the Norton trial!"

Urchins with demoniac young voices shouted these words (or an approximation of them impos-

sible of spelling) to the thousands scurrying from office buildings to street cars and busses at the close of day.

"All about the Norton Tri-ALL!"

Those who stopped to exchange their pennies for the extras, saw Connie Marsh Norton's attractive features gazing at them from the first page.

Connie as she had looked at high school graduation. Connie as she looked today. Gene Norton photographed in his prison cell smiling laconically. The picture of Norton was sandwiched in between two of Connie.

Rose Carter, the girl reporter who had assured Connie that everything she said about Gene's goodness and innocence would help him, had almost outdone herself with flamboyant adjectives praising the "brave little wife."

LOYAL LOVE FOR MATE IN PRISON CELL RESTATED BY MRS. NORTON

These were the headlines under which the glaring paragraphs appeared.

Others of the newspaper confederacy had persuaded Connie to pose for photographs. There was one with her mother—Mrs. Marsh seated holding a book in her lap and Connie behind her. There was a photograph showing the girl looking at Gene's picture and one of her in an apron standing behind a table upon which several mixing bowls were placed. The implication was that little Mrs. Norton was a domestic creature and loved nothing better than to be at home in her kitchen.

One of the least glowing of the journals found

its way to Connie's room that night. She had been in court all through the afternoon and was tired. She looked at the newspaper. Was this really going to help Gene any? Was it? It was all so—so terribly public. Like living with the window shades up!

Connie had been in the courtroom awaiting her turn as a witness. She wanted to be there too, all the time, to know how the case was going. James Guthrie was there, sent by Alenxander Marsh to counsel his daughter. Mrs. Marsh remained with Connie.

But all that hadn't seemed to make the day much easier.

A strange reaction was taking place in Connie's mind. She no longer asked for Gene. Since the interview with her husband, in fact, she seemed to be living in bewilderment. None of the things which the newspaper reporters were writing about the girl were true. She had not "professed undying devotion" to Curly Norton. She had merely nodded "yes" in answer to some question a woman reporter had put to her, not in the least thinking what that question might be. She still wanted to do all she could to help Gene. She still refused to believe he had meant to do anything wrong.

James Guthrie wrote Alexander Marsh he had every reason to hope the girl would listen sensibly to a divorce.

Guthrie was fairly competent as a lawyer. As a prognosticator he was sometimes right—sometimes wrong.

For hours Connie sat patiently listening to Clifford Nash, Norton's attorney, and trying to

answer Mr. Nash's questions. The lawyer seemed to put especial emphasis on everything Gene had said to her about "giving him a chance to make good" and promising to "go straight from now on." No, she had never heard the slightest reference to the hotel robbery. Gene had told her he had come to Monroe Junction directly from Kansas City.

She wasn't sure she liked Mr. Nash. There was something very hard and precise about everything he said. But she listened to all he told her about taking the witness stand and thought she could go through with it. Mr. Nash promised Connie he was going to get Gene out of jail.

The girl was terribly anxious about that.

If you had asked her why, what was going on in her mind—not as the garrulous author of sob stories asked but actually getting at the very center of Connie's consciousness—there would have been no clearly defined pattern of motives and opinions. There would have been only a vague hurt and a prayer.

The hurt was a private thing. The prayer was for Gene Norton.

County Attorney Shields also came to talk to the girl. He talked longer than Nash, came back again several times. Twice he talked to Connie with her mother present and once he talked to Mrs. Marsh alone.

Connie didn't like the county attorney. She knew it was his job to convict Gene. Mr. Nash assured her there was nothing to be afraid of but the reporters who were inclined to sympathize with Connie warned her, above all things, not to let Shields "get her goat."

In spite of Connie's horror at the flaring publicity with which the Norton case was being treated the suit was actually handled very fairly by the press. Particularly the girl herself received consideration.

Each day Connie sat (her mother beside her) in the courtroom listening to long, long arguments and trying to understand.

She gazed with undimmed awe at the judge up behind the great mahogany bench. Connie had never been in court before.

When she took the stand and Mr. Nash asked questions she tried to give answers as accurately as she could. She was impressed by the oath on which she agreed to tell "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

She kept remembering those words. Though she did cry one terrible day when the county attorney's voice was thundering at her, still she refused to admit the distortions of the truth he was trying to make her repeat.

"Darned good witness!" was the word in the courtroom after Connie's stellar appearance.

It was right after Connie Norton had left the stand.

There was considerable movement and rustling out in the section of the room reserved for crowding spectators which seemed to indicate sympathy for her.

Connie however, only looked at those twelve men sitting together at the side of the room and wondered what they were going to do to Gene.

She had received not the slightest preparation for the climax of that day. It came fifteen min-

utes later while County Attorney Shields was questioning a minor witness.

Connie saw the woman coming through the swinging gate which separated spectators from the court. The woman was slim, straight, taller than Connie. Men turned to look after her.

Amid the commotion at the newcomer's arrival Connie noted the woman wore a feathered toque, a tight, revealing black satin frock and a good deal of crystal jewelry which gleamed and jingled as she walked. Thrown over her arm was a long fox scarf.

Several men, less observant of the details of feminine dress, noticed that the newcomer's slippers displayed exaggerated Louis XIV heels inset with brilliants matching their buckles, that about her ankle, under the silken mesh of hose gleamed an anklet. They noted that the cut of her gown in no way prevented admiration of the graceful curves from insteps upward.

It was the woman's glowing dark eyes which alarmed Connie. She was afraid of them!

"Miss West," rolled the sonorous voice of the county attorney, turning to the stranger, "will you take the stand?"

CHAPTER XI

TRIAL BY JURY

Flo West moved sinuously toward the witness stand. There was something about the woman, about the way her graceful figure swayed, to remind you of the jungle feline. Oh, so sure of herself—and oh, so sure of others too!—was Miss Flo West.

Her gemmed heels clicked as she crossed the courtroom.

The clerk interrupted her for an instant. One hand uplifted, she paused beside him and swore to "tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth." That ceremony was brief and swift.

Now men and women crowded forward. The effect of Flo West's arrival had been electrifying. Some in that room filled with spectators, half rose in their seats, straining to see. "Who is she?" "Look at those heels, will you!" "Bet this'll be good!"

Here and there a man moved impolitely to block his neighbor's view, thus bettering his own.

The spotlight of attention was the cool elegance of Miss West who settled herself comfortably in the witness chair, one knee crossed gracefully above the other, meeting with sheerest indifference the multiplied gaze of the throng.

"Miss West," asked the county attorney,

"you are acquainted with Eugene Norton?"

The dramatic power of the unexpected held the room.

Amid complete silence Flo West spoke. Her voice was low, warm, and resonant. She replied with one word:

"Rather!"

The brittle atmosphere snapped. Eyes switched almost mechanically from the woman on the witness stand to the prisoner. One or two caught the white-faced Connie Norton, glancing first at this newcomer, then at Gene.

God spare most women from such torture!

Norton had had a moment in which to compose himself. On Flo's appearance he had lost entirely his mask of indifference. He had leaned forward, clutched Clifford Nash by the arm and whispered excitedly.

Now that was over. Gene was himself again.

But as Flo's langorous dark eyes rested upon him a flood of dull red arose in his cheeks.

Connie noticed this. She held her breath. She turned and fumbled for a handkerchief.

"You know Eugene Norton well?"

A throaty laugh, and Miss West asked:

"Just what do you mean by 'well'?"

"I mean do you feel that you are closely acquainted with him, that you know something of his likes and dislikes, his habits——"

"Objection—" interrupted the defense counsel.

The objection and its grounds were sustained by Judge Moffet.

"It's like this, Mr. Shields," Flo West said presently. "I guess I know Curly Norton about as well—about as well as you can know anybody.

He used to hang around Dutch Pete's place when I was singin' there two years ago. Got so he came around regular and—well, we've been what you call 'well acquainted' I guess ever since."

"Where is you home, Miss West?"

"Garfield Avenue and 42nd Street."

"You live alone?"

"Mr. Shields!"

"I mean have you any relatives or—women friends—who share your apartment?"

"Oh! No sir."

"Did Gene Norton ever visit you there?"

"Yes. He was there quite a lot."

"What time did he usually come to see you?"

"Objection!" again thundered Nash. This time the attorney's question went unchallenged.

"Why—why—" Miss West appeared to be floundering for an expression. "Why—just any time. Sometimes night, sometimes morning."

"Is it true that once for a period of two weeks he remained at your Garfield Avenue apartment and that other times he made prolonged stays there?"

"Yes, sir."

"On those occasions did he frequently go out of the apartment during the day?"

"No sir. He didn't go out at all."

"Did he give any reason for this?"

"Just said—just said he couldn't go out. That's all. Said the bulls'd get him."

"Did he explain to you why he was afraid of the police?"

Clifford Nash's protest cut in on the answer. When the county attorney resumed his questioning he asked:

"Miss West, how large is your apartment?"

"Three rooms. I have a living room, bedroom, kitchen and bath."

"One bedroom?"

"Yes."

There was smothered laughter in the courtroom. It seemed to displease Miss West. She glared at the crowd.

"You—you admit that your relations with Norton were not such as those approved by society?"

Again there was an interruption by the defense. The question was withdrawn evidently to Miss West's relief.

And now how the courtroom hung on every word she said. The limelight in the Norton case had suddenly shifted to this beautiful woman.

"Miss West, when did you last see Gene Norton before entering this room today?"

"It was—the seventeenth of August. He had been at my place for a while in the afternoon. Somebody called him on the telephone and then he went away and didn't come back until about 10:30 at night. I was going out just when he came in."

"Did you—go?"

"No. I came back. Curly was looking terrible and I thought I'd better see if I could do something for him."

"What do you mean by 'looking terrible'?"

"Well—he'd had too much white mule. He was drunk as a lord."

"What did you do for him?"

"Got him into a chair and made coffee and tried to get him to drink it."

"And what did he say to you?"

"He said—he said him and Mike Andrews were going to pull a deal next day. He told me they could clean up twenty or thirty grand apiece. Then he went on and told how it was all fixed and they were going to empty a hotel safe."

The girl had spoken throughout in a low tone. The last words apparently were wrung from her by unwilling force. She turned her head and hid her face in her hands.

Instantly there was clamor. The county attorney and defense counsel were shouting at the top of their voices. Neither one could be heard. The room was in tumult. Gene Norton, crouching in his chair, eyed the witness.

The judge's gavel banged insistently. Finally order was restored.

"One more question," Shields continued, "Miss West, after Norton told you this what did you do?"

"I begged him not to do it. I knew it would be dangerous. I begged him to stay with me or else get out of town at once."

"What was his answer."

"He got mad and left."

"You didn't see him again—until this afternoon?"

"No sir."

"That's all, Miss West."

But Clifford Nash detained the witness. He strode forward, paused before the witness stand. The man and woman eyed each other for several seconds. Which would win?

It had been clever of Shields, Nash told him-

self, to bring her in. But Shields wasn't going to get away with it—not without a fight!

"You say, Miss West," began Nash, "that Norton came to your apartment at 10:30 o'clock the night of August seventeenth?" (August 18th was the date of the attempted robbery.)

"Yes sir."

"And that you were entirely alone—about to leave the apartment?"

"Yes sir."

"No one else was there with you?"

"Why—no! No one else."

"May I ask where Mr. 'Spike' Carley was that night?"

"I—I don't know what you mean!"

"You don't know who I mean by 'Spike' Carley, don't you! Isn't it true that 'Spike' Carley has been signing checks for your bills—rent, food, clothes, jewels, an automobile, everything you've wanted—for the last two years?"

"It is NOT!"

"You are willing to swear to that?"

"Certainly."

"You—know Mr. Carley?"

"Merely—as a friend."

"Oh, merely as a friend! I see. Merely as a friend! Remember there is such a thing as perjury, Miss West! At the time you mentioned when you were singing in the place called 'Dutch Pete's' you were then known as 'Daisy Beck' weren't you?"

A long silence. Then came a hesitant "Y-yes."

"Why did you change your name?"

"Why—well, I quit singing and 'Daisy Beck'

was my professional name and I just quit using it—that's all!"

"Oh, no, that isn't all! You gave your name as 'Daisy Beck' when you entered the womans reformatory at Franklin after being convicted of shoplifting and you took the name of 'Flo West' when you came out eighteen months later. Isn't that true?"

No answer.

"Isn't that true?"

"Yes."

"That's all, Miss West—for the present."

To say that the Norton trial gained sensational interest that night is putting it mildly! As a crook melodrama of real life involving in a triangle the pretty little country bride, a city siren and an underworld Lothario, discussions of the day in court were city wide.

The crowds talked of it impersonally.

But not Cnonie Norton! For the first time her faith had been shaken in Gene. The long night was a battle and morning brought no respite.

It was two days later, late in the afternoon that the jury disappeared to find their verdict. Flo West's testimony was still the most damaging for Norton's case.

Connie watched the twelve men marching away, one by one. They could give or take away Gene's freedom. In Connie's own heart there was a jury battling valiantly.

On each decision hinged the delicate matter of a man's soul.

CHAPTER XII

WHY DIDN'T GENE SPEAK?

Does it indict Connie Norton, eighteen year old bride, too severely of a lack of feeling for the public good to admit that, to her, robbery of the big Chicago hotel (even if it had been a successful robbery) was in no wise as serious a charge against Gene Norton as the implications of Flo West?

HAD Gene really and truly cared for this terrible woman?

But how could any woman, even one as wicked as Flo West, admit such open shame if she was guiltless? No. She couldn't, she wouldn't——

The vision was maddening. Gene with the seductive Flo's head upon his breast, Gene's arms caressing Flo as they had caressed Connie, Gene's lips whispering into Flo's ears the same sweet secrets, pressing upon her lips the same hungry kisses, overcoming resistance with that same fervid glance. With a woman like that!

Such thoughts sent Connie Norton into cold tremors. She couldn't eat. She didn't look like the same girl.

It was one thing to forgive him a crime. COULD she forgive him Flo West?

A woman's Gethsemane is the dropping of the mantle of godship from about the shoulders of the man she loves.

In such a state of mind Connie Norton watched the last of the twelve jurors departing through the doorway to settle her husband's fate. What would THEY think—those twelve men with whom rested Gene's liberty? Would they believe Flo West or would they be moved by what she, Connie Norton, had said?

Connie discovered suddenly that Gene's eyes were upon her. She flushed, startled slightly and turned her head.

When she ventured to glance in his direction Gene had slumped back into indifference. His eyes were on the desk before him. He appeared neither to know or care what was going on.

Reporters had commented throughout the trial upon Norton's "stoic calm."

Mrs. Marsh reached an understanding hand to her daughter.

With hundreds of others in the courtroom, mother and daughter sat waiting, waiting in suspended anguish to hear that verdict. It was the ragged end of a hard week. Why, now EVERYTHING was at stake! The atmosphere was taut with strained, sharp threatenings.

Only Gene Norton appeared unaware of the strain. There were many, many things on Gene's mind.

Men and women glanced and watched, drummed nervous fingers on the arms of their chairs, looked at watches again, hoped it wasn't going to take all afternoon. Sometimes these juries stayed out for days! Well—might wait another half hour.

Court spectacles as a great American sport are seriously handicapped by this element of delay

on the part of juries. Still it heightens interest to build up suspense.

Connie felt she could stand it no longer. Her eyes again sought Gene, marveling at his calm. How could he manage it? An unwilling gleam of admiration for him fluttered in Connie's breast.

Were they—were they coming!

A slowly opening door. One man, another, the file of twelve reentering the juror's box.

Connie wadded her little blue handkerchief into a hard ball, gripping it. The foreman of the jury was arising, addressing the judge.

"The gentlemen of the jury," the tall, slim man was saying, "have instructed me to make the following report. We find the prisoner, Eugene Alfred Norton—guilty."

"GUILTY."

The word, whispered and rewhispered echoed through the courtroom. Already the crowd out in front was jamming on hats. Some were standing, ready to plunge into the street. The show was over. What did they care now—any of them —for another man's liberty?

"GUILTY!"

Newspaper headlines retold the story. Newsboys were calling out the verdict, swelling their street sales by means of it. The whole world knew now that Gene Norton was declared guilty for attempted robbery.

"—and I therefore sentence you, Eugene Alfred Norton, to imprisonment at hard labor in the state penitentiary for not less than one year and not more than three."

Those were the words which brought Connie Norton to, with a start.

She began to sob silently. Mrs. Marsh stroked the girl's shoulder, tried to think what she could do to avoid a scene.

There was no scene.

Calmly, Gene Norton walked away beside his attorney, following the turnkeys out of the courtroom, back to his cell. He was gone before Connie realized it.

"Mother! Mother!" she cried, "what are we going to DO?"

Mrs. Marsh and James Guthrie got her back to the room in the hotel. After that Guthrie was forced to promise that he would try to arrange an interview for Connie with Gene. He was forced to do this in order to keep the girl from tearing out into the streets alone.

"Nothing to worry about! Now there's nothing at all for you to worry about!" he kept repeating. "They'll probably appeal the case. Nash's a smart lawyer. He'll get him out of it. There's nothing for you to worry about now."

He was glad at last when he was able to shut the door of that room behind him and get away. God, Connie took on awful!

Connie Norton is not the first woman in history to condemn a man and then, immediately that the world turns against him, find all her reproach changed to love

Connie was like that.

It wasn't reasoning. It wasn't judgment. It was just pure instinct.

James Guthrie reported presently that Connie could visit her husband in his cell next morning at 8 o'clock.

"Tell me they're not going to appeal!" Guth-

rie said, indicating the surprise he felt. "Seems sort of queer. First one of these crook——"

He caught the look on Connie's face and his words broke abruptly He spoke of an immediate engagement. Tomorrow morning, he said, shortly before 8 o'clock he would come to take Connie to the prison. He hoped Mrs. Marsh and Mrs. Norton would get a good rest. Was that all? Very well—good night!

In the morning, Connie Norton dressed with greater care than she had given her appearance for days. She was up, splashing in the bathtub at 6:45. A cold shower after the warm sponge brought color to her cheeks. She rubbed her lithesome body until it glowed.

She then slipped into a little spun silk garment and sat before the mirror.

One dismayed glance showed Connie how she had been neglecting for days now all those little tasks which bring out and set in its proper light a woman's beauty. Frantically this morning she wanted to look her prettiest.

It wasn't only Gene she was thinking of. There was Flo's West—and all the rest of the world. Yes indeed, she felt the challenge.

So Connie did something or other to improve a pair of nicely and naturally arched eyebrows. She added the first flush of orangish-rose stuff to her cheeks which they had known for weeks. She finished with powder and a dab of flame at her lips. Perfume behind the ears and at the nape of her neck. Then a frock flung over her head.

Very shortly Connie was ready for breakfast. She had coffee and cinnamon rolls with her

Mother and was waiting at ten minutes of eight when Mr. Guthrie arrived.

With the lawyer Connie stepped into the elevator car. They descended, walked through the lobby, took a cab. Before she actually realized it, Connie was moving down the gray corridor on the way to Gene Norton's cell.

"Would you rather I'd—wait?" James Guthrie asked.

"If you please."

There was no use talking. The old tempestuous Connie was gone. This girl who looked like her and bore the same name was restrained, dignified. Suffering can do that.

Connie walked through a barred door. She saw Gene!

Then she was weeping in his arms, trying to keep the tears back. He held her tightly.

"Oh Gene!" She kept saying over and over again, "Oh Gene—Oh Gene!"

"Darling please—darling, listen, won't you—Connie!"

"Kiss me again," she whispered fiercely, "Kiss me again!"

There was so much to be said and each of them totally incapable of saying anything. They clung together—helplessly.

The pitiless white morning light shown upon them through the prison window! All the world was like that—turned on them relentlessly, sparing them not one single comforting moment of haven and retreat.

But things MUST be said!

"Gene, dear, it's—it's so terrible!"

He patted her shoulders. It was as though

Connie were the one facing punishment, Gene, the one offering comfort and strength.

"It's all right, darling," he told her. "It's all right. I—I want you to know Connie—I think you've been wonderful all the time. I'm not worth it, though. Not worth a hair of your head. I'm—I'm as bad as they say I am, Connie. You ought not to be here!" he finished pushing her away at arm's length.

Tears welled in the blue eyes.

He held her close again, "You're so wonderful!" he whispered thickly. "Connie, you'd better go——"

Connie stayed. She stayed until the turnkey told her it was time to leave and until finally James Guthrie came to take her away. Connie and Gene each tried their hardest to say the farewell. Somehow it couldn't be done.

"Listen, Connie," Gene was saying to her, "there's one thing I want to tell you—one thing I want to say——"

Suddenly his lips stiffened.

"What it is, Gene?"

"Never mind, dear," he finished, "it isn't anything."

And Connie Norton never did know, for months and months what it was Gene had started to say.

One last kiss and she had to go.

Connie boarded the train with her mother and Mr. Guthrie four hours later. They were on their way back to Monroe Junction. It had been a long time since Connie had been there. So much had happened since——

By 6 o'clock they were home. Connie refreshed herself with a bath, dressed and came down to

dinner. Mrs. Marsh had started puttering about her kitchen as soon as she was in the house.

It was a quiet meal. Somehow neither of the three wanted to talk. After dinner while Mrs. Marsh was taking out the dishes Connie and her father sat together in the living room.

"Now, Connie," said Alexander Marsh, trying to keep his voice calm and very patient. "I think we'd better go about this divorce——"

"Divorce!"

Two crimson circles flamed in Connie's cheeks.

CHAPTER XIII

REBELLION

The hot flush which glowed in each of Connie Norton's cheeks was the only sign she gave of agitation. Her eyes leveled against her father's.

"I'm not going to get a divorce," the girl said.

Obviously Mr. Marsh was trying to be calm. He arose from his chair, walked over to the window and glanced out, back again, then over to the window. He came back beside his daughter. It was no use.

"You mean to tell me," Alexander Marsh's voice exploded, "you can sit there and say that —you're going to let your life be ruined by this— this good-for-nothing! When you sat there in court and HEARD what kind of a man he is? You saw that woman and know what she was to him. You heard her talk, Connie. Connie, have you gone out of your mind? Not while you have a father to——"

"I'm not going to get a divorce—," Connie Norton repeated shortly but firmly.

Her father looked at her.

"My poor little girl!" he said slowly. "My poor little girl! You won't have to do anything about it. I'll have Guthrie fix the whole thing up. It won't take long either. You can go away with your Mother somewhere if you want to——"

"No," said Connie. "Oh, Father, don't you

see? I don't want to go any place else now. I just want to be home. Tomorrow I'm going down to the Bijou and see if I can have my job back."

"You're—you're sure you want to do that?"

"Yes," said Connie.

"But—don't you think maybe until after the divorce——"

"There isn't going to be any divorce I tell you!" Connie had arisen and was on her feet now. "I—I CAN'T get a divorce!"

With that statement hurled over one shoulder she was out of the room hurrying upstairs. When she was within her own little bedroom and the door closed she fell upon the old walnut bed and lay there until sobbing had quieted her.

Nobody came to disturb her.

After a while Connie raised her head and looked about. The outline of the black and white Pierriot doll on the dressing table stood out faintly in the dusk. What secrets she had shared with the Pierrot doll!

With a silly little girl impulse which other Connies may understand she went to the dressing table, picked up the doll and cuddled him close to her as she lay back upon the bed.

"No," said Connie, speaking privately to Pierriot, "they can't make me divorce him. I won't!"

What was passing through Connie's mind was beyond the powers of a silken Pierrot doll to understand but he appeared to listen gallantly, offering his utmost in comfort—a peaked, black cap which caught and blotted up a few of the owner's tears.

One thing which Connie knew she must decide

was what would be the right thing to do about Gene. She wanted to decide it herself and in her own way. It wasn't possible to come to any conclusion in a crowded courtroom or even in Gene's arms in a fervid, heavenly embrace.

Back in Monroe Junction, going about her former duties, slipping into the old routine, Connie believed this mad, spinning existence would cease and life would become real again.

Then she would know about Gene—and other things.

Until that time she simply could not listen to such talk as her Father's. Mrs. Marsh was closer to her daughter. The mother made no suggestions, offered no counsel.

The atmosphere of the Marsh household at luncheon next day showed the strain.

Alexander Marsh, by no means an impressive man, was doing his utmost to remember that the way to force a woman is not to seem to force her. Connie's red hair was an inheritance from her father.

"Going out anywhere today?" he asked her.

"Yes. I thought I'd go down to see Mr. Kendall and ask about a job."

"Maxine's coming over," put in Mrs. Marsh, passing the news on to her husband. Connie already knew this. "The girls can walk downtown together."

"Well—it's a good idea to get out and take a walk. It's a fine day. Crisp but the sun puts warmth into the air."

"Why, let's see," said Connie. "It's November, isn't it? Gracious, winter'll be here in no time."

"I don't see how the time can fly so," Mrs. Marsh murmured. They finished their apple pie in silence. Then Mr. Marsh, pushing his chair back from the table, arose to return to work.

"Wear something warm when you go out, Connie," he cautioned.

Connie promised she would. When Maxine Fisher arrived at ten minutes after two o'clock Connie was waiting in a green jersey sport suit with a little green felt beret in her hand.

"Connie!"

"Max!"

The girls embraced, kissed. Maxine did most of the talking because she knew most of the news. She devoured Connie with her eyes, told the other girl she was looking "wonderful" but a trifle thin and retailed as rapidly as possible events among the younger set of Monroe Junction.

"Why didn't you write to me, Connie?"

"I—I didn't feel like writing to anybody."

Maxine felt that it would be tactful to turn the conversation.

"Of course, darling. Of course, I understand. Did you know Bob Knight's got a new car! Keenest little coupe!"

"Why no! Isn't that fine. I suppose Bob's—still in the store?"

"Oh yes. Hasn't he been up to see you yet? I thought maybe——"

"No," said Connie quickly. "I—I haven't seen anyone but you, Maxine. Maybe we'd better start downtown now if we're going."

She slipped a heavy brown coat over the sport suit, called to her mother that they were leaving,

and steped out with Maxine, into the chill November air.

"My!" said Maxine, "we certainly watched for your pictures in the papers, Connie. Some of them were wonderful! Of course others weren't quite so good but I thought all the time you looked perfectly sweet. Wasn't it exciting? There must have been photographers and reporters and people like that around you all the time."

"Yes," Connie answered, "there were."

Maxine decided perhaps she shouldn't have mentioned that. She couldn't see why not though. Gracious, Connie shouldn't be so sensitive! She'd certainly been before the public long enough to get over that.

Connie knew that people were staring at her. But that wasn't the explanation of the tear which WOULDN'T be blinked back and fell upon her left cheek. It was because of all the familiar streets and buildings. They were all exactly the same.

Yet how COULD anything remain the same?

"Are you sure you want to go on to the theatre?" Maxine asked presently, a little anxiously.

"Why, yes. Of course!"

Mr. Kendall was more than affable. He led the girls into his tiny private office and held both of Connie's hands.

"Connie Marsh!" he kept repeating over and over. "Connie Marsh! Don't she look fine, though? Yes sir. Back to the old town, huh? And Connie, what can we do for you?"

It was rather hard for Connie. She found her voice.

"Why you see, Mr. Kendall—I was wondering. I mean I know I haven't any right to ask it but I was wondering if I could have my old job back?"

"Well! Wants her old job back, does she! What do you think of that? Do you know, Connie, this new girl I've got isn't any good. She doesn't take an interest—makes too many mistakes. Sure you can have your job back. When would you like to start? Next Monday?"

The day was Thursday.

"Yes. If you can manage it—next Monday."

"Monday it is then. And Connie—talk about coincidences. What do you think? Just this afternoon I go a newsreel from Chicago with your pictures taken in court Monday Think of that! This very afternoon. I'll have the girl in the ticket window and the same girl on the screen too! They're fine pictures. I looked at 'em!"

"You mean—pictures of ME?"

"You bet, pictures of you. Good ones. Kid, you know you screen fine!"

"Oh, but Mr. Kendall——"

"There, there, Connie. Take it easy. Take it easy!"

She sank into the nearest chair, staring out of the window so that she wouldn't have to look at them.

Kendall glanced toward Maxine Fisher. Maxine looked back at him. Both of them were afraid things weren't going just right and neither knew exactly why.

Connie smiled in a few seconds.

"I'm all right," she said. "It's just—getting

back home again. That's all." As she spoke she arose from the chair. "I'll be here Monday at 1 o'clock Mr. Kendall."

"That's jake with me."

At the dinner table Connie told her parents she was going to work Monday afternoon.

"You're sure it won't be too hard?" her father asked doubtfully.

"Why, just at first I suppose it'll seem a little queer but I'll get over that all right. It was nice of Mr. Kendall to take me back. Don't you think so?"

She wandered into the living room later, determined not to spend that evening as she had the night before. One of her troubles, Connie told herself, was thinking too much about her own affairs and forgetting about other people. She must quit that! There was her father, her mother. She must try to be a better daughter to them.

She did try. But Mr. Marsh had left the house to buy an evening paper and her mother was at the telephone half an hour later when the doorbell rang.

Connie had to answer it herself and keep her lips from trembling.

The man on the threshold was Bob Knight.

CHAPTER XIV

CONNIE FACES FACTS

"Good evening, Connie. May—may I come in to see you?"

Of course, if she had known that it was Bob Knight standing there at the door waiting for admittance, Connie never would have answered the bell. She would have used one of the old excuses—any of them—pleaded a headache or ran over to the neighbors by the back way.

But there he was. And there she was.

"Why yes, Bob, of course. I'm glad to see you! Come in."

Something in the boy's eyes went straight to her heart and clutched there. Here was Bob—come to her! The person whom probably in all the world she had abused most. All the carefully rehearsed phrases she had gone over whenever she thought of such a meeting, faded. She forgot about loyalty to Gene. She forgot past weeks.

She remembered Bob's goodness and the ways in which she had hurt him.

Both of them were embarrassed.

Connie moved to one side a little and held the door open so that the young man might enter the hall. Then she led the way into the living room.

Mrs. Marsh had finished her telephone conversation. She was just returning to the room.

"Why, it's Bob! My, we're glad to see you. Come over here and take this comfortable seat, Bob. What have you been doing with yourself lately?"

Mrs. Marsh always had preferred Bob Knight to any of Connie's other suitors. She made no pretense of concealing this fact, insisted that the young man should be seated on the davenport, switched the shade of the bridge lamp so that its glow was rosy and subdued, then left the young couple to themselves.

Connie wished her mother had stayed with them. It would have made things easier.

The girl sat in a low rocker, shunning the davenport where so many, many evenings she had sat beside Bob. Now, she glanced at him uneasily.

"Maxine says you've bought a new car."

Ten minutes enthusiastic description of the wonder of the coupe followed.

"Got a chance to make a good trade," he explained. "That's how I happened to get it just now. Otherwise I would have waited until next spring. I'd like to have you hear the way that motor purrs, Connie. Just like a cat full of canaries! Listen, would you care to——"

"Yes, Bob. I'd love to—some other time," Connie answered his half-put question.

"It was good of you to come over tonight, Bob. There are lots of things I ought to say—I don't know just how to begin. You know—well, I mean I was GOING to write to you right away after I was married, and try to explain. Then—after everything happened—I just didn't write to anybody! I couldn't."

"Why, Connie. I don't see why you need to go into all that now——"

"But I want to, Bob! I want to get it all said. That's the way I feel about everything! I want to come back here to Monroe Junction—and see people and let them stare if they want to and get it over with! Oh, it's the only way I'm sure, that things will ever be the same."

"Do you want them—the same, Connie?"

"Yes—of course." She didn't dream that Bob might misunderstand her as she said that. "I want to go on just as things were before. Why, this afternoon I went down and asked for my old job back. I'm going to have it too. Beginning next Monday!"

"Connie, don't you think—well, something else might be a good deal easier just at first than sitting in that ticket window?"

She couldn't help but smile at his earnestness.

"Silly old Bob!" Connie said. "No, I'm not afraid that they'll eat me."

But after a while when they had rattled along about mutual friends and happenings in Monroe Junction and the strained casualness had worn away, Connie's manner changed.

She leaned nearer to the boy.

"Bob," said Connie brokenly, "do folks here think I'm—terrible?"

"Why, Connie, what ever made you think of such a thing?"

"But—do they?"

"No, of course they don't! Of course not. Good gracious, what ever made you imagine a thing like that?"

"Do YOU think I'm wicked?"

It was simply devilish to look at a man in that way, but Connie Norton didn't realize it. She was aware simply that Bob had taken her into his arms, that he held her tenderly as though she were a little girl.

"Don't talk that way, Honey!" Bob was whispering fiercely. He held her close to him and then, mechanically, sharply, drew his arms away and moved across the room.

Connie's eyes were hidden in a wisp of creamy linen.

"I think I'll have to go, Connie," the young man said shortly and turned as though looking to see where he had placed his hat.

Connie followed him into the hall.

"Good night, Bob."

"Good night."

The door closed behind him. Connie came back into the roseshaded living room. But barely had she reached her chair there when she whirled about and hurried to the front door. She pulled it open, stepped out on the edge of the porch and peered down the street.

There must have been something she wanted very much to say to the young man disappearing in the distance. He was too far away by that time to be called back.

Connie came back into the house and said to her Mother she wouldn't be surprised if they'd have frost before morning.

The following Monday at ten minutes before 1 p. m. Connie Norton reached the Bijou Theatre. Mr. Kendall was there in the office. He gave her

the key to the ticket window, repeated familiar instructions and a moment later Connie was in the old seat facing Broad Street.

The dress Connie wore was the most inconspicuous she owned—a gray flannel severely plain with trim linen collar and cuffs and a black tie. She had chosen the frock purposely.

Unfortunately for Connie's conservative intentions if there was a color background in the world which could have made that lovely copper and gold head more vivid than it naturally was it was this very shade of neutral gray with tracings of black and white.

She had never looked more beautiful. Connie Norton's loveliness was the sort which takes added distinction from widening experience. Her sorrows had added to it, just as her joys. Wise Mr. Kendall indeed to put such a charming decoy before his theatre.

"Oh, hello, Connie! Hello! Two tickets. Listen—do you know I've kept a scrap book of every one of your pictures and all the newspaper clippings. Oh, it's a big book! I'll bring it over sometime. Maybe there's some there you didn't see—Listen——"

That was scatter-brained little Hortense Clarke. She moved into the theatre at last.

There were others who talked less than Hortense but were far more irritating. Mrs. Harvey Howard, for instance, who walked right up to the ticket window as though she wanted to buy a ticket and then, seeing the girl there, whirled right around and flounced down the street.

Connie was near tears by the time the third member of the Home Sewing Circle had fastened

a gimlet gaze upon her, trying apparently to ferret out hidden guilt, and then moved along with buzzing tongue.

"Well, I kind of thought so myself. Of course, you can't tell—" Connie heard the last of the three say.

The crowd came thick and fast It was evidently going to be a big day at the Bijou. Connie Norton had the feeling that three-fourths of those curious eyes were there not to buy tickets and see the motion picture program but to stare at her.

"Well, well—if it isn't our own Peggy Joyce!"

She'd always hated Roland Webster. She hated him doubly now for those cutting words. Nevertheless Connie was obliged to hold out two tickets for Webster and receive his coins.

She sneezed vigorously (which is a way of getting rid of tears) and sat back relieved as the line diminished. Oh, was it going to be as bad as this every day!

Something came into her line of vision which was the last straw.

On the edge of the sidewalk, directly in front of her and not more than five yards away, stood a camera tripod. Someone was taking her picture!

A figure hooded under voluminous folds of black stuff emerged and came toward her grinning. It was Elmer Hoskins, the town photographer.

"Think I've got a beauty there, Miss—er—Mrs. Norton. Hope you don't mind. Kendall tipped me off you'd be back on the job today and you know those newspaper folks nearly run

me ragged these last three weeks for pictures of you. Wanted one of you sittin' at the ticket window but of course, I didn't have it because I never took none. I'm goin' to get this off to the newspaper tonight. Tell you—they pay high! And I'll finish one up for you, too."

It didn't occur to Connie that she might have stopped him. Suddenly she had become too wretched, much too wretched, to protest fate.

So Kendall had tipped the photographer off! And she had thought the theatre manager was being kind to offer back her job.

Was this business of pictures and newspapers, staring faces and back-bitting gossip NEVER to end? Was she always going to have to face it?

She had tried desperately to face things gamely. This was too much!

That night when Mr. Marsh brought up the subject of divorce again at the table Connie was surprisingly quiet and agreeable. Her father didn't know that she had heard scarcely a word he said.

Alexander Marsh was so pleased over his success, he failed to notice anything strange in the girl's manner or in her voice. She would have agreed to anything that night to get away upstairs to her room.

At last she was alone there. Alone. It was nine o'clock. Connie pressed the door shut, leaned against it, realizing suddenly that her strength had gone. Now that the thing had actually to be done it was going to be hard. Terribly hard.

But she would do it! She would!

Fifteen minutes later everything was ready.

CHAPTER XV

POSITION WANTED

Connie pulled her hat on and glanced about the room. No, there was nothing else. Everything she needed was packed in the brown hat box. Somehow she couldn't take any of those other things. . . . things her father and mother had bought her years ago and which she loved for their associations. She loved everything in this little blue and maize room.

Connie Norton took a last sweeping glance at it all and slipped through the door.

The room, after she had gone, looked very much as it had half an hour earlier. There was one change.

Primly erect, propped against the tray on the dressing table was a white envelope. In Connie's handwriting this envelope was addressed to "Mother and Father."

Connie had written the note thoughtfully. Down in the left hand corner of the page in two places there were puffy little circles which might have been tear drops. Above them the message read:

"Dear Mother and Father:

"I am praying you'll understand that I think you're the dearest parents in the world. After all I've done you've stood by me. But

there just isn't any use any more! I thought everything would get straightened out here at home. Instead it's getting worse.

"I can't tell you what I'm going to do though I wish I could. You'll just have to believe it's for the best, the same as I do. And don't forget ever that I love you, love you, love you.

"Connie."

Mrs. Alexander Marsh found the note at 9:30 o'clock next morning when she opened the door of her daughter's room. When her husband reached the house in response to an incoherent telephone message he did what he could to quiet his wife and hurried to the railway station.

"Why yes," Jake Sullivan, veteran ticket agent, told him, "Connie asked for a ticket to Chicago. Pulled out on the 10:15. I had a suspicion there was something wrong but she put the money down and I had to hand out the ticket. Girls nowadays—ain't they a caution? And nobody knows what they'll be doin' next."

There were others to second Jake Sullivan's last remark. One of them was Connie Norton.

Connie didn't know what she was going to do next. She hadn't the least idea.

Almost all of the night before, sitting in the day coach and listening to the grinding wheels carrying her farther and farther away from home, Connie kept asking herself that question. What was she going to do after she reached Chicago?

There were humiliating memories for Connie connected with thoughts of the city. She would

have chosen some more distant destination if it had been a matter of her own choice. But she couldn't choose. She had money enough to take her to Chicago and that settled that. She was afraid of the city but she was more afraid of a small town in which every individual knew every other person, everything they did, thought or said.

And so at an early morning hour Connie arrived in the big, handsomely built railway station.

What a blessing to find herself ignored and obscure in that throng!

That, to a tremendous number of her children, is the great appeal of the city. It is democracy moved to its last degree. It is liberty—personal and of property. The jostling, swaying crowd is your true modern sanctuary.

Connie placed the brown hat box upon a bench in one corner of the waiting room and sat beside it. She looked into her purse.

Eighteen—nineteen—twenty-one dollars there. And sixty cents.

She walked to a checking stand, left the hat box and walked out into the street. Ignoring the taxicabs, Connie made her way to a shining white enameled restaurant.

Breakfast was comforting.

After all, why should Connie fret? She was free, white, and half-past eighteen years old. The sun was shining. The November air was crisp and invigorating. Connie tried another mouthful of corn cake with maple syrup. It made an uncommonly good breakfast with broiled sausages and coffee.

Connie Norton didn't know it but she was ob-

serving the traditional rites of the job-hunter. One good square meal to start and then come what may.

First she must find a place to live.

There were a great many places where rooms could be had, listed in the want-ad section of the morning newspaper she had bought. Connie turned to the want-ads but she was confused hopelessly as she read them. She had not a notion in the world how to find any of the addresses.

A waitress paused to ask the girl if she would have more coffee. Connie nodded and succumbed to an impulsive idea.

"I've only just come to Chicago this morning," she said to the girl pouring coffee.

"Yeh? That so?"

"Yes, and I'm awfully anxious to find a place to stay—you know, a room somewhere. There are lots of them listed on this page but I don't know where any of the streets are."

The waitress looked at Connie, seemed impressed by her smile.

"Where'd you want to live?"

"I don't know! But I think I'd rather be—well, not too far away. I have to find a job too and I don't think I could pay more than about $6 a week."

"Lemme see that sheet."

Connie handed the newspaper to the waitress and watched as she read down the column, checking with a pencil a number here and there.

"Well, I'd try these first if I were you. That street isn't very far away from here. If you're new in the city though, you'd better take a cab.

Won't set you back more than forty cents. Here —I'd try here first and then if you don't like it this other place is on the same street."

With profuse thanks and a ten cent tip (which seemed handsome) Connie departed. On the street she hailed a taxi.

She stopped at the station for her hat box and then rode to the first address on her list of prospects. It wasn't a very nice place but a house farther down the block proved satisfactory. Mrs. Whitaker, the woman in charge, accepted her $6 payment in advance and Connie found herself inside a tiny bedroom, bare but clean and comfortably warm. It was on the second floor.

The place was so different, Connie thought, from the cheerful blue and maize room she had deserted in Monroe Junction as—well, as Connie Norton herself looked in the oddly distorting mirror placed above the bureau.

Connie lay down on the bed (it was fairly comfortable) and closed her eyes.

She awoke with the queerest sensation that things had been happening in a dream. Where—where was she? She frowned, and closed her eyes for a moment. Then it came back to Connie. She sat on the side of the bed and briskly began to plan.

Presently she opened the brown hat box and took out her dresses, arranging them on hooks in the little curtained-off closet space. She refreshed her face with cold water and then put on her hat and coat. She had discovered by a glance at her wrist watch that it was 1 o'clock.

Mrs. Whitaker had told her about the street cars and which to take to get downtown.

A sandwich and a glass of milk was enough for lunch.

And now Connie Norton made her way toward a definite destination. She had inquired for directions and walked until she reached a newspaper building where large posters in the windows proclaimed:

"Want-ads Bring Results."

Connie at that moment was not interested in want-ads. She asked the elevator boy how to reach the editorial department, and stepped from the elevator, as directed, on the fourth floor.

She informed an elderly man at the information desk that she wished to see Rose Carter.

"See if she's here now," he replied and disappeared.

When he returned Miss Carter was behind him.

"Why—why how do you do!" she exclaimed as she recognized the girl. "I didn't know you were in town now."

"I—I wasn't until this morning."

"And what are you doing here?"

"Well, you see—I found I didn't want to stay in Monroe Junction any more, so I just left. Listen—please don't put this in the paper! I don't want you to write any more about me. That isn't why I've come. You see——"

And Connie attempted to explain to the somewhat surprised Miss Carter how she was sure the newspaper woman was tremendously important in the city and begged her to help her find a job. But none of this must be printed in the day's chronicle of events!

"Sure, I'll do what I can for you!" Miss Carter replied briskly when the case was stated. "Let's see now. Just what experience have you had?"

At the close of the interview Connie had given Rose Carter her telephone number, had been instructed how to follow up suggestions in the want ad columns and try to find something for herself. She had promised to drop in to see Miss Carter two days later.

Rose Carter always tried to be helpful but she wasn't sure that she could do so very much for Connie.

"Say, Mrs. Norton," she hesitated, "would you—could you use a loan for a week or so?"

"Oh no, thank you! I'll get along all right—that is, if I can only find a job."

"Well, we'll try to manage it. Some place in this over-grown city they must need a pretty red-head. By the way, Connie, are you using your own name?"

"I told the woman at house where I'm staying my name was Constance Norton. Do you think anyone will think about it?"

"Well, I don't know. Depends what kind of a job you get. But don't tell 'em you're 'Mrs. Norton'. Some places won't take married women at all."

It had been a satisfactory interview, the girl told herself when she was back on the street. She was glad to have seen Rose Carter. Now where to?

It was nearly 4 o'clock. She hesitated about going back to her lonely room. It seemed too late to start job-hunting. Connie decided on a

stroll around the shop windows. She would begin memorizing the streets.

Connie walked rapidly. She had begun to feel confident, happy and free. It was great to be alive. Everything was going to come out all right now.

Suddenly the girl became aware that someone was watching her. Connie checked her steps and stared.

She couldn't believe it. Yes! The woman was actually—Flo West.

CHAPTER XVI

FLO WEST AGAIN

Gene Norton's wife stared at this other woman who had confessed openly being everything except wife to Gene.

From the gold straps glittering on chiffon ankles to her smart black satin turban Flo West looked exactly what she had proclaimed herself. Her imitation broadtail wrap was a contrast to Connie's last season cloth coat. Her perfumed skin was expensively made-up. Her black eyes glowed under beaded lashes.

And this was the woman who had turned upon Gene and betrayed him!

"Why—why, aren't you Connie Norton? Gene Norton's wife?" the woman asked.

"I am."

Proud, scornful too, Connie felt. She should never in the world have spoken a word to Flo West but Connie couldn't help but boast her claim on Gene.

A pair of haunting, hypnotic dark eyes were fastened on her.

"I thought so." And such a change seemed to come over Flo West.

"I thought so," Miss West repeated. "Oh, Mrs. Norton, you don't know how much I've wanted to talk to you! They wouldn't let me

near you during the trial. There's something I've GOT to tell you!"

It was an impassioned appeal taking Connie entirely off her guard. She had never dreamed that Flo West could be a person like this.

"What—what is it?" she asked uneasily.

"Why—" the woman in sleek, silky fur glanced about. "There's a place over across the street where I could tell you. The 'Golden Dragon.' Will you come?"

Ordinarily Connie Norton was a young person with a generous equipment of common sense. When Gene Norton came upon the scene that quality must have taken flight. Now, facing the woman of whom the very thought aroused violent, blazing reactions, the same thing happened again.

"Yes," said Connie. "I'll go."

But how impossible to believe that she could actually be walking across the street with this garishly attired stranger. Connie Norton and Flo West!

They mounted a long stairway with walls of mirrors. Subdued yellow lights glowed at the top of the stairs. Flo West held to the railing and Connie noticed upon what extraordinarily fragile heels her slippers balanced.

"It's a long climb," Miss West said, "but we can talk up here."

She led the way into the Chinese restaurant.

Connie had never beheld such a room. It was very large. She saw the great gilded wooden dragon high against the wall at the rear, palm trees and poppy shaded lanterns here and there. There were small booths curtained off against

one side of the wall. The curtains were made of gold and red beads.

Connie had visited a "chop suey joint" in Morristown but it had had none of this splendor. Dazzled by her surroundings, for a moment forgetful why she had come, Connie followed her companion.

And Flo could manage artfully.

Presently the girl found that they were in one of the private booths. Miss West pushed a button in the wall. An Oriental waiter appeared with the menu card.

"What's yours?" Flo asked.

"I don't hardly know," Connie said. "I guess —just a sandwich. It isn't long since I had lunch."

"No? Well, it's getting late just the same. Let's really eat! That chicken and almond chow mein you've got out in the kitchen isn't so bad, Ling. Suppose you bring a couple orders. And tea." She turned to Connie. "You like tea, don't you?"

Yes, Connie liked tea. She was bewildered by Miss West. Now that they were in this place the woman had thrown back her wrap, revealing a gold and purple georgette frock. She seemed to have lost that note of wistful pathos.

"There was something you wanted to say to me, wasn't there?" Connie asked.

"Oh yes." The dark eyes became dramatic again. Oh, indeed Connie must have been mistaken the moment before. There was that same quality of helpless sadness back in Flo's eyes.

"Yes," said the other woman pensively. Her eyes rested on Connie. "But—it isn't so easy!"

Connie stirred restlessly. She wished she hadn't come to this place.

"You aren't like me," Flo West continued. "You're just as different from me as day and night. I know that. There isn't anything I'm complaining about, Kid. Would you mind tellin' me—why you're back here?"

It wasn't at all what Connie had come there for. She admitted, surprised at her own voice, that she was in Chicago because she found she couldn't stay in Monroe Junction, that she intended to pay her own way and that she was looking for a job.

With absorbed interest Flo West listened. That was what she wanted. She was ready now.

"I see," said Flo. "You know this makes it a little easier for me to begin. Because you know, Girlie, maybe you wouldn't believe it but I can remember the day when I landed in this burg exactly like you. Straight from the country lookin' for a job. But that isn't what I got to tell you now.

"I wanted you to know—God how I wanted to tell you!—and I thought maybe you'd get it to Curly—but that doesn't matter now. They forced me to say all I did about him at the trial."

A white-faced girl repeated the words:

"Forced you?"

Flo nodded. "Yes, I suppose it sounds terrible to you. Well, I can't go into that. I'm risking a lot even to tell you this. There's a good deal in this town that would surprise you, Girlie. Only you see——"

Her voice sank to huskiness.

"You see, maybe it kind of puts us in the same

boat. There's—there's a bond between us. Don't you see? Oh, I know you're a million times finer and better than I am but—we both love—Gene!"

Connie Norton's eyes narrowed.

"You won out, my dear," the low, throaty voice continued, "but I loved him too. Oh, I did love him! I know it's all over now. He wouldn't look at me—not if I was the last woman on earth. But if there was anything—don't you see if there was anything I could do for you—well, it would make me feel better. That's what I wanted to say to you."

There are women in plenty who can make such a story go down with the opposite sex, but to convince red-headed, level-eyed little Connie Norton —that was triumph!

Flo West held her audience.

"You mean," Connie said slowly, "you—you think it would be paying back Gene if you did something for me?"

Flo nodded silently—dramatically.

"If you wanta put it that way. Just—let me do one decent thing—for Gene!"

Connie Norton's eyes were misted. Something caught in her throat. The Oriental youth was bringing in a tray from which he placed food before them. Connie noticed that Flo West was dabbing at her eyes with a pink handkerchief. She watched uncertainly. It all seemed wrong! Of course it was. But Connie's tender heart couldn't figure out the mystery.

Flo West—imagine hearing that from Flo West!

By this time Miss West had composed herself. She was helping Connie to a plate of delicious looking food.

"These Chinks know how to cook all right," Flo said.

To a youngster who had lunched on one sandwich the chow mein was ambrosia. And the tea was nectar. The girl felt a sense of shock when Miss West absent-mindedly pulled forth from her handbag, a gold cigarette case. She opened it, holding it out toward Connie.

"Smoke?" she inquired nonchalantly.

"No—no thank you. Not now."

Flo enjoyed her cigarette musingly. The moment of tragedy had passed.

"Well, Girlie, what about it?" she asked.

"It's—it's awfully kind of you to want to help me, Miss West, but really there isn't anything—I don't know——"

"You want a job, don't you?"

"Yes. I'll have to find something——"

"Leave it to me! Wait a minute—I've thought of something." She was out of her chair and disappearing through the doorway.

In spite of Flo's promise at least ten minutes passed before she reappeared again. Then she came smiling, pulled out another cigarette, lit it and sat down.

"It's all jake—everything's settled!"

"What's settled?"

"Your job, Girlie. I telephoned a friend of mine. You used to work in a picture house in your home town, didn't you?"

"Yes, I sold tickets——"

"Well, that's what I thought! This friend of mine hasn't got a picture house. He owns a theatre—here, at this address." She tore a cor-

ner from the menu card and scribbled down a street number.

"That's the place. I called him up and he says if you come out there tonight he can use you selling tickets. It'll be permanent work. You see, I made it plain that there was a reason why I wanted him to give you a chance. These places have hard luck anyhow getting girls who've really had experience. He was glad to know about you. You can go right out now——"

Telling herself she must not lose the chance of employment Connie asked how she was to find the place.

"Better take a cab tonight. You can use street cars later. Here. . . . Come on, we'll go right down and grab one."

And Connie Norton shortly found herself hurried into a glaringly hued taxicab, the bit of pencilled paper crammed into her hand and Flo West outside on the pavement giving directions to the driver.

It all seemed to have happened a little too suddenly for Connie. She was still wondering how it had come about.

Connie Norton had not heard Flo West's voice during that telephone conversation. She had not heard Flo's bitter words: "And don't you let her get away!"

CHAPTER XVII

BETTER LUCK

The lights on either side of State Street glittered and melted into a continuous stream of misty radiance. The taxicab jostled its perilous, careening pathway in and out among crowding motors. It was after 5 o'clock now—the rush hour. Headlong through the noisy pack the taxi plunged.

Connie Norton, staring tremulously through the cab window, felt herself caught in grim, unrelenting cross-currents.

What was the use?

The taxi-driver in the seat ahead must be a mad man. It seemed any moment the car would topple over and capsize. She could see the man's uniformed shoulders and the back of his head.

A droning meter clicked monotonously.

And why should she care if there was a smash-up? Why should she be on her way now to ask for work—for a job? Connie didn't care. She didn't care for anything in the world. She couldn't keep her thoughts away from Gene Norton—Gene as he had been a little while ago. So near to her. Gene and the look in his eyes, the touch of his cheek, the warmth of his lips.

Every one of those memories now was sullied and tarnished—by the vision of this other woman.

Maybe Flo West was to be pitied—but what about Gene?

Tears came tremblingly down the girl's cheeks. They would not stop. After twenty-four hours (or was it twenty-four years!) of emotional stimulation reaction had begun.

She leaned back in the darkened corner of the cab and let the tears come.

Gradually they seemed to ease her grief. Why should she blame Gene for it all? Why blame Flo? What was the use of blaming anyone?

The handkerchief Connie had been applying to her eyes was a limp and useless rag now. It was disagreeably damp. Oh, she must pull herself together!

The girl drew from her pocket a vanity case and snapped its lid back.

Such a face was reflected by that mirror!

Swollen, red-rimmed eyes, cheeks lined by tear marks, a countenance that was simply hopeless.

It would never, never do to ask anyone for a job looking such a mess. Vanity came to the vanguard. Now that Connie had had her cry she was ready to take life by the horns again.

She leaned forward, tapping on the glass which separated the back of the cab from the driver's seat and waited until the man had slipped back the little door so that he could hear what she said.

"What did you say Ma'am?" he asked.

"I want you to turn around. I've—changed my mind. Will you please take me to this address instead?"

She gave him the number of her rooming house.

If reformers who agitate about the evils of women's vanity could know what Connie Norton's

little mirror had saved her from that night surely they might pause. But the girl herself was ignorant of her salvation.

No, she certainly couldn't be seen by a prospective employer looking the way she did just then.

After ten minutes' ride they came to the rooming house.

The ticket which the taxi-driver held out to Connie, showing the amount of the fare bore the awesome total of $2.85. It was horrifying but Connie foraged in her purse and pulled out one of her last two $5 bills.

The taxi-driver took it, gave the girl a curious glance and counted out the change. Connie held out her hand for the coins. As he gave them to her the man said

"I gotta take this fare, ma'am, but listen—if you need a loan I can spare it easy."

He was watching her, reaching into a hip pocket.

"No thank you," Connie told him, "I have money."

"Sure you couldn't use it?"

The girl shook her head.

Incomprehensible as this may sound to persons convinced that all taxi-drivers are hard-boiled yeggs the apology for the incident must be that it did happen. Connie's appearance probably inspired the overture. She did look pitiful.

Furthermore Number Ninety-six (that was the driver's number) knew more about the destination of their interrupted ride than Connie did.

It was merely an incident but it may prove to a few skeptics that the giant city is not altogether heartless. The city is—above all else—amazing.

Connie's eyes were grateful as she turned to the man and said, "Good-night!"

An hour later she was snuggling under the scant covers of the new bed, telling herself tomorrow would be different. Still, Connie couldn't keep back a few tears. They eased her taut, nerve-strained little body. She drifted into sleep.

Next morning did prove to be different.

She slept late. Not that she had intended to—far from it! Weariness took its toll and it was after 8 o'clock when Connie opened her eyes and realized she faced new worlds to conquer.

At once she was out of bed, dashing cold water on her face, hastily pulling on garments, brushing her hair and hurrying through the process of getting ready to hunt a job.

She was pulling on her hat when she heard Mrs. Whitaker calling:

"Miss Norton—Miss Norton!"

"What is it?"

"Telephone!"

It seemed strange that anyone should be calling her but she hurried down the stairs.

"Yes—this is Constance Norton."

"Oh yes. Good morning! I'm glad——"

The girl's words broke off as she listened.

"Why, how wonderful! Oh, it's awfully good of you! Yes—I can go right over. I don't know how I can ever thank you. Wait a minute—did I get the number right?"

She repeated a street number, pulled a pencil from her coat pocket and wrote down the address.

"There—is that right? Well, you certainly have been nice about it and I appreciate it ever so much. Well, goodbye——"

Ross Carter who was at the other end of that telephone connection was a busy person. She had no time to waste on useless words. Rose said goodbye and hung up the receiver.

But to Connie Norton the moment was glorious!

Miss Carter had informed her that there was a job as usher in a fashionable suburban motion picture theatre which she could probably get if she would go there directly. The name of the theatre was the "Riviera."

In the shortest possible time Connie Norton had boarded a north bound street car, headed for the Riviera theatre.

She found Michael Morgan, the manager, to be a pleasant spoken young man who seemed very business-like. He said it must have been through the motion picture editor of the newspaper that Miss Carter had heard of the opening. Yes, there was still a place if she was interested.

Connie mentioned that she had sold tickets and made herself generally useful at the Bijou in Monroe Junction.

Morgan seemed less interested in that than he was in the girl's attractive appearance. He told her to take off her coat and hat so he could see how she would compare in size with the other girls. She was shown the ushers' costumes.

Flaring colonial coats of brown corduroy, knee breeches of cocoa brown satin and buckled pumps. There was a billowing, creamy lace stock and jabot which covered most of the white blouse.

"I think it will fit you all right," said Morgan, "better try it on."

After Connie had reappeared in the vividly

imagined costume there was not a doubt but that it did fit her and that it was extremely becoming. The rich brown kindled her gorgeous hair into flame.

Connie knew she was stunning as she stood there. Morgan told her that she was hired. The salary was to be $18 a week and she must be at the theatre from 1 o'clock in the afternoon until ten o'clock at night. There would be one hour off for dinner.

Five other girls were employed as ushers. Their work was arranged so that alternately each had one free day in seven. Connie's free day would be Wednesday.

"Can you begin tomorrow?" Morgan asked.

"Today—if you want me."

So it was settled and Connie began her duties that very afternoon.

It was easy work though tiring. She carried a small flashlight and stood in her appointed aisle, just as the other girls, ushering the matinee crowd into their seats. There were always plenty of seats in the afternoon, the others told her, so that the job was simple. Evenings when it was necessary to keep watch of every row and know each seat as it was taken or vacated the work was more difficult.

"It's fun," Connie's heart sang. "I'm going to like this job."

She did like it because it kept her busy and because no one knew anything about her here or made embarrassing inquiries. She didn't have much time to talk to the other girls because they were stationed in different parts of the theatre.

When Connie reached home at night it was always late and she was tired but then she could sleep late in the morning.

She wrote to her father and mother and told them about the new job. She also wrote a long letter to Gene.

The following Wednesday when Connie was free from work she rode downtown, drawn by the insistent appeal of the crowd. She strolled along State Street until she reached a newstand which sold out of town newspapers.

She would buy a Monroe Junction paper!

Connie stepped up to the stand, asked for the newspaper and received it. She turned away and was slipping the coins into her purse when, with an awkward gesture she dropped the purse.

Nickels, dimes, keys, purse scattered every way!

Connie knelt to recapture them, flushing. In her confusion she noticed a stranger was helping her. He came forward, holding out the runaway coins.

Connie tried to cover her embarrassment with a smile. She looked up—and continued staring at Bob Knight.

CHAPTER XVIII

A SUDDEN SUMMONS

"Why, Bob!"

Smiling, half-doubting that she could believe her eyes, Connie rose to her feet. The pushing, hurrying State Street crowd was forgotten. It was like a miracle! There was only this young man and Connie Norton in that throng.

His blue eyes adored her.

"Why—Bob!" Connie repeated softly.

With those words began a new chapter in the life of Connie Norton. She didn't realize it then nor for a long time afterward. But the question was clearly outlined from that moment: "Which is it going to be—Gene or Bob?"

The same problem she had settled when she promised to marry Bob.

The same problem she had settled when she spoke her vows with Gene.

And now, as is the way with human problems, it was bobbing up again to be settled once more.

Bob took both the girl's hands in his. She was beginning to hear his words now in that dear, familiar voice:

"Wonderful—have had the darndest time—wonderful to find you, Connie. Gee, you look fine!"

"I'm glad you think so."

Her eyes were smiling but there was something

on one cheek which Connie brushed hastily aside with the back of her hand.

"But Bob, what are you doing here?" she asked.

"Not a thing—not a single thing in the world now that I've found you. Say, that was a tough job! I believe you've been flying around in an airplane up in the clouds and just come down. Gosh—I've looked everywhere for you!"

Connie laughed excitedly. Oh, but it was good to hear him, to feel that she wasn't alone any longer! He was the very same old Bob come back to her—the Bob of three months ago.

"Where's the nearest place to eat?" Bob wanted to know. "Let's go where we can talk about six hours or so. I want to hear what it's like up at the North Pole—or wherever you've come from."

Each of them was a little afraid to return to the world of facts. It was easier—safer—to go on joking. Jokes do not mean anything—or they may mean a great deal. But jokes can be laughed at. Facts somehow will not stand for laughter.

"Why—let's see! There's—there's a place I know in the next block."

Connie hesitated because the only restaurant in which she had dined in the neighborhood was the "Golden Dragon," the place where Flo West had taken her.

They walked toward the "Golden Dragon."

Connie didn't exactly like to take Bob Knight there—didn't want to go there herself. It wasn't pleasant to be reminded of that other occasion. But how could that matter now? It was silly even to think about it.

So Connie and Bob went up that long steep stairway leading to the gilded gaiety upon the second floor. The orchestra was clattering out jazz rhythms. The slant-eyed head waiter led them to a table near a window.

Quite the same, everything looked, as it had one week earlier. It was still early for the dinner crowd but two couples were dancing in a roped off enclosure across the room.

Connie's coat was thrown over the back of her chair. Bob sat facing her. And each looked at the other wondering how and where to start.

"Well," said Bob, "you left them pretty badly worried, at home, Connie."

"Yes, I suppose so. I—I was sorry about that."

"Oh, of course I—I can sort of see the way things look to you all right. You weren't yourself at all. Gee, you know you're looking ten times better right now than you did the last time I saw you. Ten times better!"

"Thanks. How did you happen to come to Chicago, Bob?"

He flushed and shifted his glance toward the dancers. Bob Knight wasn't the sort to make impassioned love speeches. He didn't know how and probably wouldn't have tried it if he had. He answered:

"Well—I just thought I'd come and see how you were getting along. Your father and mother are awfully set on having you back home again, Connie."

It was the girl's turn to grow evasive.

"Yes, of course—I suppose so. I wrote them a letter the other day."

"They'll be glad to get it. Your father and mother, well—they worry a lot about your being here alone, Connie."

"Did they ask you to come to find me?"

"No! I just—well, I was just sort of worried about you myself—and so I—well, I've been wanting to make a trip up here for quite a while anyway. Didn't seem to do much good though. Gee, I'd bout given up hope of seeing you!"

She told him about her work at the Riviera theatre, how she had found the place and how it happened she had been downtown that afternoon. When she finished, Bob said:

"Well, gosh, that seems queer! You know I never would have thought anything about hanging around that newstand only someone said I could get the Journal there. That's why I was beating it over there when I saw you. Well, it was queer all right!"

"Yes it was."

The conversation drifted while the waiter set their food before them. This time it was no combination of bamboo sprouts, chicken and savory sauces but a genuine masculine menu of broiled steak, vegetables, French fried potatoes, salad and hot rolls.

Back in Bob's mind was the question he hoped to put diplomatically and in Connie's was the refusal she knew she must make. It came finally.

"Connie," Bob was speaking in his most appealing tone, "won't you go back with me—tomorrow afternoon?"

The blunt, straightforward manner was the only way for Bob to express himself.

"You mean back to Monroe Junction?"

He nodded.

"No," the girl shook her head. "No, I can't do that, Bob. It isn't that I don't hate to have the folks feel the way they do. I know it seems mean. I've been mean to just about everybody—I certainly have to you. But Monroe Junction—Oh, I can't stand it! I CAN'T go back! I've just got to stay here away from everybody until I feel differently and sort of find myself."

Bob didn't answer. He looked at her and his eyes seemed to say things Connie would have preferred not to think about.

"I've just got to settle some things—in my own mind," Connie went on hesitatingly. "Don't you see—Bob?"

"I guess so."

The waiter brought the menu again and asked them to select dessert. Connie ordered almond cakes and tea. Bob asked for preserved fruit.

They tried to talk of impersonal subjects. The atmosphere gradually lost its strain.

"Want to dance, Connie?"

No, Connie didn't want to dance.

After the dessert and after they had talked a little longer Connie let Bob take her home. She sat very prim and dignified in the taxicab. Bob apparently was preoccupied. Presently Connie asked how much longer he was going to be in town.

"Don't know for sure," he told her. "I sort of thought I'd get back by the end of the week but I may stay longer. Can I call you up in a day or so?"

"Of course."

Connie told him the number, cautioning him to

telephone in the morning before 11 o'clock. They didn't like the girls to be bothered by telephone calls at the theatre, she explained.

He said good night at the door and promised again to telephone. Connie said good night.

And that was all there was of that day.

A letter came next morning from Gene. It brought a shock as Connie looked at the prison stamp on the envelope. Connie had never received a letter from Gene Norton before.

The folded sheet within bore a mark indicating that the message had been scrutinized and approved by an official.

Gene wrote:

"Dear Connie:

I certainly was glad to get the news that you've found a good place to stay and like your job. I don't like to think about you being alone in the city, though. It would seem lots better to know that you were in Monroe Junction in that pretty little house with your father and mother. God knows I haven't any right to try to tell you what to do—and I wouldn't anyhow. Your way may be the best. Only remember there are lots of things in a big city different from your home town, most of them not half as good.

Connie, it was fine of you to write to me and I appreciate it. I just wanted to tell you if you should ever care to come here and could make it all right the last Saturday in the month is visitors' day and there's one guy here who would certainly be happy to see you. I didn't mean to ask you to come down. I'm just telling you about it —if you wanted to, sometime.

Things here are about the way I guess they always are. It isn't exactly any pleasure resort but

a guy is kept busy and that's all right too. There are plenty here a lot worse off than I am. Thanks for the letter.

With love,

GENE."

Those three last words—"with love—Gene" were the ones Connie treasured. She pressed the folded sheet to her lips, read it all through once more and put the envelope into her purse.

It seemed rather fine of Gene Norton to take things that way.

At intervals that day and the next, Connie re-read her letter.

Two nights later (she had come home from the theatre and it was nearly 11 o'clock) a very unusual summons came from downstairs for "Miss Norton."

Could it be Bob? Connie hurried down stairs.

She had never seen the stranger in the doorway. In the dim lights of the hall he seemed only a blurred outline.

"I'm Miss Norton. You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. My name's Bates—Barney Bates. I've heard of you lots of times—from Gene. What I came to ask you to do, Miss Norton, is to come with me to Flo West's place. She's sick, been calling out your name for hours—out of her head with fever. It ain't very far from here and the doctor said seein' you might quiet her. She's awful sick!"

"Just a minute—I'll get my coat."

Connie had turned and was already half-way up the stairs.

CHAPTER XIX

ONE NIGHT

Without a hat, her brown coat pulled tightly about her slim figure, Connie Norton went down the walk with Barney Bates, and stepped into the coupe waiting at the curb.

She glanced uncomfortably at the man.

Why, if Experience is the teacher which philosophers declare, will men and women continue making the same mistakes? Every mistake Connie Norton had made during her whole life was one of hasty, impetuous action. No one could say now that past errors had profited her much.

The half-light of the darkened car masked Connie's companion's features. A dark felt hat shaded his eyes and his cigarette's glow cast the face further into shadow. He wore no overcoat but the car was warm enough.

Nothing formidable at all about Barney Bates' appearance. Still the girl had begun to realize that she had again been impulsive.

Perhaps Bates was aware of this.

"It isn't far from here," he said. To make the distance still shorter he touched the car's accelerator. Their speed increased.

"You said Miss West is—ill?"

He nodded.

"Been out of her head for hours. Nobody could understand what it was she was tryin' to

say about you but the doctor said maybe if she'd see you she'd quiet down. I thought myself she might have somethin' to tell you—about Gene."

Bates gave her a full glance as he spoke. There was something startling, something disquieting about this stranger. Connie couldn't explain to herself just why she should feel so queerly. She asked:

"You know Gene?"

"Nobody knows him better, Girlie. Been on jobs together."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"Do you mean—worked together?"

The man laughed. His voice was disagreeably harsh.

"Sure we worked together. Pullin' jobs like we did is work all right—if you get away with it. Trouble with Norton was in that last deal the damn' fool lost his nerve."

"Will you please——"

He interrupted her. "Oh, excuse me! Guess I'm forgetting myself. But Girlie, it's true just the same. Take a guy like Norton—he could have cleaned up big in a few years. Never had a real chance before the hotel job. What does he do? Sees a girl and goes mushy. Oh yes, I know it was you—but why couldn't he use his head? Well, Norton was just like the rest! The dames gets 'em every time."

Connie didn't like Barney Bates at all. She didn't like the way he eyed her or his smile or the way he was talking about Gene. She had begun to realize that her companion was a thief, a crook, perhaps even worse! She wished they would arrive at their destination so that she could be rid

of him. And going home she decided to take a taxi cab.

"Is it much further?"

"Just a little way now."

In spite of this assurance the coupe snorted along. Connie wished she were home in her own room. She really did now! Why on earth should she go to all this trouble for Flo West?

"Are you sure they'll let me see Miss West?"

"You'll see her."

Neither of them spoke again. It seemed to Connie they must have come miles since leaving her rooming house. It was horrible to think that Gene Norton had lived with such fugitives, laughed at their jokes, shared in their shame. It seemed to take Gene away from Connie. She hated Barney Bates.

The girl was having a struggle to keep down her nervousness. Just when it seemed impossible the car halted before a large building.

"This is the place," Bates informed her.

He halted the car expertly beside the curbing, stopped the motor and leaned forward to open the door for the girl.

Connie stepped out on the pavement. Bates followed. It was a cold night and Connie pulled her wrap about her more closely. She looked up at the building. It was evidently a large, well kept apartment house in a neighborhood of apartments.

They walked through the marble floored entrance and Bates pulled a key ring from his pocket. He opened the door.

Connie knew too little about apartment resi-

dences to wonder at this. Without ringing for admittance the man led the way.

They crossed the lobby and stepped into a small elevator car. There was no one to operate the lift. The door clicked behind them and Connie glanced at Bates, terrified. He punched a button somewhere among a row of them and the car began to ascend.

Undoubtedly the most harmless of Connie's adventures that evening had most frightened her—an automatic elevator!

On the fourth floor they left the car.

"Which way?" asked Connie.

"Down to the end of the hall."

Bates walked ahead, leading the way down an L-shaped hallway. He paused before a door. Again failing to rap or ring he applied his key to the lock.

Connie looked at him a bit uncertainly but she stepped into the room. The door closed.

"Just a minute," said Bates. "I'll step in to see Flo."

He disappeared into an inner chamber.

Connie looked about her. The room was large, overly elaborate in its furnishings. There was a large and expensive davenport against one wall. An orange-shaded lamp stood near, a rose one farther off. The radio at the opposite side of the room was encased in a cabinet of oak. There were chairs, a desk and two or three small tables.

Had Gene been here—in this place?

Hesitant, uncertain, Connie Norton took in the details of the room. She still clutched her coat tightly as though for protection.

Bates, smiling and with his hat off, came through the doorway.

"Well," he said, "it's all fixed. Flo's all right, they tell me. Now we can settle down and enjoy the evening."

A blank stare was his answer.

"Aw, don't look like that, Baby! We ain't going to be interrupted by Flo West or anybody else. We've got the night before us. What do you say—have a little drink?"

Before he had finished Connie was backing away terrified against the door. She reached behind her to find the knob.

"You mean—she isn't here?"

The door wouldn't give.

Bates stood his ground smiling.

"Say, you don't think I'd take chances, do you? No sir, that isn't my way! Don't fool around with that door there either. You're just wasting your time—and mine. You're not leaving this place tonight. Can't you understand that?"

She had turned and with all her might was pulling at the door. Bates made no effort to interrupt. It was unnecessary.

"You might just as well make up your mind to be a good sport and be reasonable," he said to her. "There isn't anybody around to hear you if you yell but if you try it I'll have to be rough. And that isn't my way—unless it's necessary. Here, take this now and behave yourself."

He had filled two glasses placed on a low table and was holding one of them toward her.

Connie Norton turned on the man like an inflamed fury. All thought of peril was gone from

her. She saw that she had been trapped and that was enough.

"You—you beast! You brought me here to see a sick woman—because I could help her—because of Gene. And all the time you were just lying—LYING to me! How dare you? Oh, how dare you, you brute!"

And in the sort of rage in which red-haired Connie would have defied the devil himself, she grabbed both glasses from the tray, flung them full in the man's face and ran toward the door.

But there was as far as Connie got.

She started to beat upon the wooden panels with her fists. With a cat-like spring the man had reached her, overpowered her struggling in his arms. She felt his lips—wet, repulsive, stinging—on her cheeks and on her neck.

Connie pounded wildly with both fists.

"You little devil, you! You little devil!"

Then as suddenly as he had grabbed the girl, Barney Bates dropped her. He had heard something. He caught sight of the moving door knob. Someone was coming! Another moment——

A spring, a lunge, then darkness.

Connie Norton never could describe that confusion. She heard the sound, the noises in the hall, saw the gleaming electricity of the room suddenly turned to pitch blackness. A door slammed.

In another moment the entrance from the hallway crashed through. Instinctively Connie flattened against the wall.

Men were rushing into the room—one, two, she didn't know how many. Chairs were overturned. They were calling to one another. Someone ran

into the farther room into which Bates had disappeared. There were cries, "Down the stairway!" "Which way?" rising above the confused tumult.

A thunderous, piercing roar!

Father in Heaven—it must have been a gun! She heard it over again. Oh, what was all this hellish nightmare? What—oh what?

They were still shouting, still running through the rooms. Obstacles overturned in the darkness crashed.

To Connie Norton the hideous, careening world had stopped.

The girl's body, fallen to the floor, half propped against the wall, was the center of a blazing yellow flashlight. Men were talking but Connie failed to hear their voices. Someone touched her but she was not aware of it. Someone knelt beside her. She didn't know of it.

Connie Norton lay unconscious.

CHAPTER XX

UNWELCOME

"Well—we got one of 'em!"

The yellow circle of the policeman's flashlight was turned full on the girl's figure just as she had fallen. A man was kneeling beside her. The blinding light beat down upon Connie's expressionless face. Her eyelids remained closed.

"Brady—find that damned switch and get some lights on here!"

It was a voice of authority speaking. The others responded.

In a few minutes the next room became illuminated.

"Take the girl in there."

Vaguely, Connie Norton began to be aware that she was lying down and that strange figures were moving about. Something cold and wet was on her head.

She opened her eyes again. She wondered what this place was. What was she doing here? Who was that man and to whom was he talking?

Her jumbled consciousness began to piece itself together. This room—where?—how?——

Connie pulled herself up on one elbow, closed her eyes, opened them again, stared!

"Feeling better now?"

She saw that the man was an officer. There were

other officers standing about. But this room! She had never seen the place.

"Oh-h!" moaned Connie despairingly. "What happened?"

She tried to lift herself into a sitting position. The man in the blue uniform was helping her. Connie put out one hand. She was still mystified about her surroundings.

"What happened?" she asked again weakly.

"Think you can make it all right?"

She was on her feet, a little wobbly, but feeling much better. The man's arm protected her. Connie reached for the back of a chair. She pulled herself toward it. She sat down in the chair.

Someone handed her a glass of water.

The room, as Connie's vision cleared, became a bedroom. It was a very rumpled, confused looking place. Covers on the bed were awry. Chairs were jammed together. Dresser drawers were open. She saw a window, half-way up, leading out upon a fire escape.

There were four men in police uniforms. One was searching a dressing table. The one who had helped Connie to the chair now moved away.

Opposite her the man with the authoritative voice was sitting lazily on the arm of a chair, studying her in a way which Connie considered bold.

Nobody had answered her questions. Nobody had told her how she came there. Connie was about to speak again when——

In a horrifying moment she remembered Barney Bates!

"Oh, where—" she started to cry out.

"What's your name?" asked the officer on the chair arm.

"Con—Constance Norton."

"Married?"

"Yes."

"Live with your husband?"

"No." (It was a very timid, tiny-voiced 'no.')

"How long you been here with Bates?"

"Oh—then it was—Where's he gone? Tell me what's happened?"

The agonized pleading in the girl's eyes had a meaning far different than the truth for the police official.

"Nothing's happened—yet!" he said crustily. "Now then, tell me how long you been here with Bates."

"It was just—well, it couldn't have been more than five minutes I don't think. You see we just got here and——"

"Five minutes!" Evidently that news annoyed the officer. "Now see here, don't try to get funny! You don't get away with that. No use trying! Hurry up—give me the story straight!"

Connie blinked her eyes and tried to think. Everything was certainly horribly confused. She put a hand to her head.

As she did so the brown coat which, all this while had been fastened closely about her fell back. The officer's eyes narrowed.

Beneath the coat Connie was wearing a soft blue silk smock loosely open at the neck and nearly sleeveless. Her mother had made it and Connie used the dainty thing as a lounging robe. It was what she had been wearing in her room when

Barney Bates arrived and she had hastily flung the brown coat over it without bothering to change into a street dress.

To the police captain and his assistants the blue silk appeared distinctly as a "negligee."

Connie thought about her bare arms as soon as the coat slipped down. She pulled it back hastily.

"Guess you both were trying to make a getaway," the captain countered. "Well, Barney evidently doesn't believe in 'women and children first'. Now tell me—how long you been hanging around with Bates?"

"Why I—I never saw him before tonight! I tell you we just got here."

It seemed difficult to make the policeman understand. Connie told her story as clearly as she could. She told him she worked at the theatre and after she had come home tonight this strange man had come and asked her to go see a sick friend. She didn't mention Flo West's name. When the officer asked about the friend Connie blushed and became evasive. She didn't like to talk about Flo and failed to see, moreover, how her name could matter, anyway.

Connie continued. She explained that Bates had brought her to this place instead of to her friend's home. No, she'd never seen her friend's apartment. She didn't know what it looked like.

"And you say it was only five minutes later that he beat it out the window?"

Evidently Bates had used the open window and fire-escape for his retreat.

"Yes. I guess he heard you in the hall. I heard something too—but not until after he'd run into this room."

"Oh, then you weren't in this room?"

The girl flushed.

"I was standing," she said, "right out there where—I fainted."

An hour and a half later it was all over. Connie Norton had been sent back to her home. She believed she had convinced Captain Duncan with the truth of her story.

The fact that Duncan was an old-timer in the service and that he had picked up more than one fugitive by watching a woman whose freedom was entirely unmolested by the law—all this was beyond the knowledge of Connie Norton.

She went to the theatre and came home again every evening for a week without the slightest suspicion that an interest in these expeditions was manifest at police headquarters.

In fact Connie thought the hideous episode of Barney Bates' call was wiped from the slate forever.

She didn't dream that she was yet to learn its most disastrous consequences.

Connie was surprised the following Saturday when Bob Knight's voice reached her over the telephone.

"I supposed you'd gone back to Monroe Junction," she told Bob.

"Without seeing you again?"

"Well—I didn't hear anything from you and you said you expected to get home by the end of the week."

"Yeh. I said that but I'm not going. I've got a job here."

"Got a job!"

"Sure—in a clothing store. It'll give me a

chance to pick up ideas for the store at home. Besides—well, I just thought it would be fun to hang around a big town for a while."

"Oh, Bob, I'm so glad! Why, that's perfectly wonderful!"

"Glad you feel that way about it. Listen—when can we have dinner together?"

"The only evening I have off from work is Wednesday."

"Let's make it Wednesday then. Next Wednesday! If I come out to the house for you about 6 o'clock will that be all right?"

Evidently it would be. The conversation ended and a certain young man found the next four days intolerably long.

At last when Wednesday evening arrived they dined in a quaint Danish tearoom and finished the evening at a play. Connie enjoyed it.

Mr. and Mrs. Marsh appeared to be reassured about their daughter's determination to stay in the city after learning Bob Knight was to be there. Connie was perfectly aware what was in her parents' minds.

She had thought about that a good deal herself.

But Connie's problems weren't the sort to be settled by a half hour's contemplation in an easy chair. She came gradually to think the only way to solve anything was to try to avoid solving it.

Letters came from Gene and she answered them. But there was one secret she carefully avoided mentioning in those letters. It had to do with a roll of dollar bills thriftily accumulating in her purse and an arrangement she had to shift her holiday from Wednesday to Saturday the last week of the month.

Nobody else in the world was to know about the expedition. When Saturday finally came Connie Norton, with quickening pulse beat and very bright eyes, bought a railroad ticket and settled herself on the train which was to take her to Gene.

Sometimes when she felt that wild, throbbing elation Connie longed for a definition of love. Was it this mad sweetness, sweeping heaven and hell in its path? Was it the calmer quiet happiness of being with Bob?

She never could decide when she tried to think about it. One thing was definite though. When she was with Gene Norton there was positively no choice.

"If I feel that way again today," Connie told herself. "I think I'll know."

It was a tiring trip but it came to an end by 2:30 in the afternoon. Without stopping for lunch Connie stepped into one of the rickety taxi cabs about the station and told the driver her destination. Then from the cab window she watched the passing rows of houses. Rows and rows. After that a stretch of level country. At last the cab wheeled in and circled about a drive.

Connie got out of the car, paid the driver and stared up at the stone turreted walls. What a thing a prison is!

The girl sensed it all in that moment—or thought she did. Desolation, bleakness. She hurried toward a door, pulled it open and stepped into a bare, cement floored enclosure.

"I have come," she said to the man before her, "to see Gene Norton. This is your visitors' day, isn't it?"

The man nodded. He disappeared through a barred door, stopping to fasten the lock.

It must have been five or six minutes later be fore he returned.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the man said, "but you can't see Norton. He says he doesn't want to see visitors."

CHAPTER XXI

WHO'S TO BLAME?

"No, ma'am," the prison guard informed Connie Norton. "I wouldn't be able to let you in now. No—not any time today. Norton says he don't want to see anybody."

"But—but he doesn't—why, he can't understand. I'm his wife! Don't you see? It's a surprise. He doesn't know I'm here—to surprise him! You must let me see him. YOU MUST!"

Officials who deal with relatives of prison inmates as part of the day's work regularly 365 days of the year are not to be moved by emotional scenes. They couldn't be; they'd lose their jobs.

"He doesn't want to see anyone, ma'am. I'm sorry. It's a rule. They don't have to see anyone they don't want to."

"You mean I can't—when I've come so far. But here—here I've got his letter here. I'll show you what he wrote. Look!"

Connie pulled from her handbag the weeks old letter in which Gene had asked her, if she possibly could, to be there on visitors' day.

The tall young official read the page.

"Yes, ma'am. I see what it says there all right. But he must have changed his mind. He don't want to see anybody today. That's what he said. Maybe next visiting day'll be different. You could write him a letter and see."

"Oh, but I can't believe he doesn't want to see me! Why he—he can't— Listen, can I write a little note to him? Tell him it's Connie?"

"No, ma'am. You couldn't do that. All correspondence with inmates got to go through the mails. Tell you what I could do though— I can go back and speak to him again."

"Oh, WILL you? Will you do that for me? Tell him it's his wife here— Connie! Tell him it's Connie!"

In a fever of anxiety and bewilderment the girl waited. Oh, but it must have been just a mistake! He couldn't dream that SHE was there. In another minute, just another minute now, she would be with Gene.

It seemed much longer than a minute or two before the tall official returned. Then as he stepped quickly through the doorway Connie knew it wasn't any use.

She began to wonder if it was she herself who had suddenly lost her mind. She put out a groping hand toward a bench.

"I'm very sorry, Ma'am," said the young guard (and if his words were correctly colorless as an official's should be there was an undercurrent of sympathy in his tone), "Norton doesn't want to see—anyone."

Connie walked through the gateway, out into the courtyard. The blankness of the unfamiliar scene about her was a reflection of the blankness in her mind.

Gene didn't want to see her.

Gene didn't want to see HER.

Once before—when he had been in prison and they let her go to him, it had been the same way.

He didn't want to see her that time either. She had gone and been sorry afterward that she had gone.

Connie's little world was in chaos. She took the simplest, most direct means of righting it, merely putting one foot in front of the other and slowly walking back toward the town. During that long walk the haze gradually lightened.

She couldn't understand but she must go on doing the familiar, accustomed things, waiting and praying that this hateful dream would vanish presently. It MUST be a dream!

We do pray—even the irreligious—when life becomes wrechtedly hopeless and we are confronted with new proof of our insignificance. We go down on our knees then in helplessness, asking Providence to intervene and make over the entire universe according to our needs.

When Connie reached the railway station at the end of an hour's walk, she found there was still more than an hour to wait before the train back to Chicago would arrive. She even remembered that she had not eaten since breakfast and sought out a lunch counter.

The doughnuts and coffee were tasteless. She found she could not eat them.

It was while Connie sat on the tall stool beside the counter that she reached her blackest, bitterest despair. Just a little while before, she remembered telling herself that today—when she should be with Gene—she would know whether or not she ought to go on keeping his name, fighting this fight to keep her promise "for better, for worse."

And then Connie caught her breath. WAS this the answer to that question?

All right for that Gene Norton!— All right for him!

But it didn't last long—that wave of anger—much as she wanted it to. The crisis Connie was living through stirred her too deeply for a moment's whim.

The girlish looking young woman in the brown coat and snug brown felt who boarded the northbound train an hour later looked pale and serious. A woman across the aisle and a few seats ahead nudged her companion as she indicated Connie.

"Must be goin' to see sick folks. Looks worried!" the woman said.

It wasn't "sick folks" Connie Norton was going to—just a sick soul. She would find it at her destination because she couldn't leave it behind her.

What could have happened to change Gene?

Suddenly Connie felt chilled, her strength spent. Was it—was it because Gene really DID care still for—that creature?

Of course writing to him after this was unthinkable. There was just one source of an explanation. It would have to come from—him.

Thus Gene Norton, living behind grim walls received no letters for several weeks. Gene thought he understood the reason well though. Connie would have been surprised indeed to have followed his reasoning.

It began with a letter which had reached him. Strictly speaking it wasn't a letter at all but it came in the usual correspondence envelope and bore Gene's name and address typewritten. He had torn off the end of the envelope inquisitively.

Inside there was nothing but a small square of

print paper. One side had been crossed with pencil marks. The other contained two paragraphs from a Chicago newspaper which Connie Norton had never seen. She never did see them. The paragraphs read:

"Once more the wily Barney Bates, wanted on a series of charges including burglary and grand larceny, evaded the hand of the law last night. In a raid on an apartment building at 54 Blank Street where Bates is believed to have been living for sometime, officers found only a raised window indicating Bates' flight by the fire escape. The building is in the center of an exclusive residence district.

"A young woman giving her name as Constance Norton was in the apartment and admitted having gone there with Bates. She was questioned but not detained. She gave her age as 18 and a residence address on Columbia Street."

Gene knew where Connie lived. How could there be any doubt——

Half-truths can do such inestimable damage. And how was Gene to suspect who had clipped and mailed those paragraphs?

It was then that the young man decided he had no interest in visitors. Bitterly he repeated that statement even when he knew Connie was waiting to see him. If he regretted this five minutes later it left him no better off than others who have experienced regret.

You can't figure out why men and women do these things which make them miserable. They simply DO!

The other girls who ushered at the Riviera

never had understood why little Connie Norton was so quiet. They wondered more about it in the days following Connie's Saturday holiday.

One person who was favorably impressed by this quietness was Michael Morgan, the theatre manager.

Connie had slipped into her becoming usherette costume and was going from the dressing room toward the theatre lobby the following Monday afternoon when Morgan summoned her to his office.

"Miss Norton," he said, "did you tell me you've had experience in office work?"

"Yes sir. I had typing and bookkeeping in high school and in the theatre where I worked before I wrote letters and kept accounts and did lots of things like that for Mr. Kendall. He was the manager."

"I thought I remembered something like that. Would you be interested in a change here from ushering to this office? It would involve—er—a, slight raise."

"Oh, I certainly would, Mr. Morgan!"

"Um!" the young manager frowned a moment. "My secretary, Miss Ryan, is going over to the downtown office. We could arrange it, I think—say for $20 a week to start? I'll make it $22 later if things work out well. You'll have to be here from 9 until 6— Of course with a lunch hour. Want to try it?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, Miss Ryan will be here until Saturday. I'll have to find a new usher in the meantime. Report here for duty Monday morning at 9 o'clock."

"Thank you, Mr. Morgan. I really hope I can satisfy you."

The interview was ended and Connie returned to the darkened aisles, pointing out to matinee comers where they would find the best seats.

She was eager to try the change in work. Ushering was all right but it would be a lot nicer to have regular office hours. The $2 raise would be a blessing and she hoped to earn that additional raise later.

Somehow half an hour later Connie didn't care so much about that promotion. She didn't care much about anything. Connie told herself she ought to snap out of this streak of blues. She really must!

That night during the dinner hour Connie went to a telephone booth and called up Bob Knight. She was lonely, she told him, and wanted someone to talk to very, very much.

Bob promised eagerly to meet her at the Riviera at 10 o'clock that night.

CHAPTER XXII

A DRIVE THROUGH THE PARK

The slim shadow falling across the sidewalk near the stage entrance of the Riviera Theatre was that of a young man, an impatient one, judging from the way the shadow dipped and dodged.

Well, it was five minutes after ten o'clock and Connie Norton hadn't shown up yet. Bob had already waited fifteen minutes. Poor Bob Knight! If he had not been so relentlessly prompt himself he might have gained hours of time in the evenings he had spent waiting for Connie.

Bright moonlight showered across the walk. That didn't help matters. Moonlight and stars, even in December, are romantic. Bob wanted to see Connie—wanted like the devil to see her—and wondered if, when she came, he'd have the nerve to go through with it.

At least she'd asked him to come. That was something.

Maybe she wasn't going to show up!

That doubt was settled instantly. The stage door swung outward and there beside him was Connie, coat collar bundled high under her chin, little brown hat pulled down snugly, blue eyes bright.

"H'lo, Bob."

"H'lo, Connie. How's the girl tonight? Gee—you look fine!"

"Think so? Well, I don't feel so snappy."

"No. What's the matter, Hon?"

The little old pet name slipped out without Bob really meaning to say it. Connie didn't seem to notice.

"Oh, nothing," she answered. "I guess everything's going along all right now. I got a raise to-day."

"Hurray!"

"And I'm going to work in Mr. Morgan's office instead of ushering after Saturday. That's the reason for the raise. I can have regular office hours instead of having to stay every night and don't have to wear the uniform."

"You look cute in that uniform."

"Yes? Well, I don't want to look cute."

"That's too bad then 'cause you're certainly out of luck! Listen, let's go places and do things and maybe you'll forget such terrible things as getting promotions and raises. Where do you want to go?"

"Just any place where we can talk."

Instinctively Bob took the girl's arm and held her closer to him. He had been trying to say things which were flippant and careless. In Connie's last words he had read a sudden, exhilarating meaning.

They walked slowly and neither spoke for several moments. Then Bob said:

"Suppose we take a taxi and drive for a while."

"Yes. Let's!"

They had to wait several minutes at the street intersection before a bright hued cab drew to the curb.

"Just drive through the park," Bob instructed

the chauffeur as he followed Connie into the cab.

As on many, many other occasions Bob's right arm slipped behind Connie's shoulders. She let it stay there without objection. Connie Norton was in the mood where a protecting arm is a comfort.

"Let's not talk," she said softly. Her eyelids closed and remained shut for several seconds.

So they did not talk. But the communion of silent thoughts can be more stirring than words.

Bob's fingers slipped over Connie's left hand. They had held hands many, many times before. She was aware that she ought not to let him do it now. But why not? Who else was there to consider in anything she chose to do? Who cared? Bob was really very comforting. She needed comfort now.

It was Connie finally who broke the silence.

"Just think, Bob—it's December!"

"Yes."

"Before we know it it'll be Christmas."

"I suppose so. Are you going home?"

"No. I couldn't get off. They're having a special program. It's one of the big days at the theatre. Do you remember last Christmas, Bob?"

"Bet I do."

Well, a lot of things can change in twelve months. A lot of things HAD changed. Another year—what was it going to be like in another year?

"Connie— Connie, don't you care any more at all?"

"But—but, Bob, you mustn't!"

Tortured words—words he had held back desperately for weeks—were out. She hadn't ex-

pected them. Connie hadn't dreamed of this. She rebounded instantly but she couldn't push his arms away. He had taken her by the shoulders, held her roughly, his fingers pressing into the flesh so that they caused a sharp pain. The girl's lips twinged.

"Bob, please!"

"Oh, my God, Connie——"

For one intense moment he stared into her face. But this didn't seem like Bob! A second later the youth's arms had dropped. He was sitting back in the car. It was as though Connie Norton had dropped from the earth.

She shouldn't have come out with him like this! She shouldn't have encouraged Bob—let him think she was encouraging him! Self-recrimination overwhelmed her. She heard him speaking:

"Would you rather go home now?"

"Yes."

Bob gave the driver the street number. His face had become stoically calm. His lips held to a firm line.

"Bob," Connie spoke anxiously. "I don't mean to hurt you. You know I don't! It's just—well, I don't know what to do!"

There was no answer. The girl continued:

"You know I do like you—a lot."

"Is that so?"

"Why, of course it is, Bob. I'm so tired tonight. I won't behave a bit like this the next time you see me. When will you come out again?"

"Anytime you say. You know it's always up to you."

"Well, I don't get any day off this week but after Sunday I'll have every evening free."

"How about Monday?"

"Maybe we'd better make it Tuesday. Monday'll be my first day on the job and I don't think I'd better plan to go out that night."

"All right, we'll make it Tuesday. I'll come around by the theatre and we'll try to find a new place to have dinner."

"I'd love to do that."

Shortly after that the cab drew up before Connie's rooming place. Bob said goodnight at the door. The evening was over.

For Connie Norton the rest of the week sped rapidly. She was looking forward to the new job because it would mean change. She wrote her parents about the promotion. They appeared to be pleased.

At last Monday arrived and three minutes before nine o'clock Connie was at the theatre. Morgan was ahead of her, sitting at his desk when she entered the room.

"Good morning, Mr. Morgan."

"Good morning, Miss Norton. That is your desk over there. You'll find everything, I think."

Within the next ten minutes' time he gave her instructions about his letters, a file of correspondence to go through and an outline of duties which would keep Connie busy until noon.

The Riviera theatre was in the midst of preparations for a "bigger Movies" week.

Morgan had objected strenuously to taking on a new girl just at this time but there was nothing he could do about it. He found Connie Norton teachable and a little more promising than he had expected.

Connie worked slowly but she didn't make mis-

takes. She knew it was the safe way. This was much more interesting than ushering.

But when 5 o'clock arrived Tuesday evening it was clear she couldn't keep her date with Bob. Morgan had given her a new list of patrons who were to receive the Riviera's announcement cards. The names must be stencilled, run off on envelopes and then the enclosures slipped in.

"It's a mean way to start you out on a new job, Miss Norton, but it can't be helped. The cards have got to be in tomorrow morning's mail. If you'll work this evening I'll see that it's made up to you."

"Why yes. I can stay and work tonight."

"One of the boys will help. I'll work myself and we can have it done in a couple of hours.

"I think so."

Connie didn't believe two hours would finish the work but she was willing to appear optimistic. A few moments later she went to the theatre lobby where there was a public telephone. She called Bob Knight and told him the date would have to be postponed.

"I don't know how long it's going to take, Bob. My Boss says the work's all got to go out tonight."

Bob's voice came back to her:

"The big Bum! Well, I'm sorry, Connie. I'll call up sometime tomorrow."

It was nearly nine o'clock when the last card was slipped into the last envelope. Connie was deftly adding a touch of powder to her chin in her hurry to leave when Morgan said:

"I'll be glad to take you home, Miss Norton. My car's near."

"Oh, thank you—if it isn't out of your way."

He was good looking and well tailored, this manager of the Riviera Theatre. The roadster bore an impressive trade crest. And surely there wasn't a reason in the world why Connie Norton should not drive home with Morgan.

Neither did there seem to be any good reason why they shouldn't stop at "The Cabin" for something to eat on the way.

"You must be as starved as I am," Morgan insisted. "Lunch counter sandwiches don't amount to much."

Very palatable was the food set before them in "The Cabin." And very interesting and agreeable was Morgan.

Everything was going along pleasantly until Connie Norton emerging from the restaurant beside Morgan, shifted her head ever so slightly and in that instant recognized a young man standing near the curb.

Her cheeks colored. She tried to nod casually, covering her embarrassment, but it was a miserable failure.

CHAPTER XXIII

OVER THE TELEPHONE

VERY calmly—in spite of the scorching red spots in each cheek—Connnie Norton eyed the young man at the curb and bent her head politely toward him.

Michael Morgan, standing beside her and lost in the animated climax of an anecdote, failed to see Bob Knight. Morgan leaned nearer to Connie, smiling as he did so.

There wasn't anything wrong with that smile or with Morgan's manner. It merely struck Bob Knight that there was.

Entirely unaware of this little drama Morgan helped Connie into the green roadster. After all it is probably pleasanter to tell a story to a pretty girl than to any other audience and if you are going to help anyone into your car you can do much worse than choose a curly red-head with pink cheeks, red lips and the general appearance of Constance Norton.

The girl's cheeks flamed especially pink just then. She gave Michael Morgan a flashing glance intended to cover up her confusion.

In an instant the roadster had pulled away from the curbing leaving Bob Knight to whatever his thoughts may have been.

If Bob wanted to believe she had deliberately

broken her date with him for another, there wasn't anything she could do about it, Connie told herself. When she reached home she could telephone. But Bob couldn't be silly enough to actually imagine things like that.

She thanked Morgan for the drive and left him with a hasty good night.

After Connie pulled off her hat and coat in her own room she paused mechanically before the mirror fluffing out her copper curls. Should she or should she not call Bob?

For several seconds she stood in the center of the room undecided. Then, the argument settled in the affirmative, Connie picked up her door-key and stepped into the hall, closing the door behind her. She went downstairs to the telephone.

A woman answered after Connie asked Central to give her the number of Bob's lodging place.

"Hello. May I speak to Robert Knight?"

"Mr. Knight? Just a minute—I'll see if he's in."

A pause of some seconds was followed by the woman's voice back on the wire.

"Mr. Knight's not in now. Will you leave a message?"

"Have you any idea when he'll be there?"

"No'm. He didn't say when he went out. I couldn't tell you."

"Will you ask him to call this number when he gets in?"

Connie repeated her own telephone number. The woman promised to deliver the message and Connie went upstairs to wait. After all, she wasn't responsible to Bob Knight for what she

did. Still she didn't want to hurt his feelings again. If Bob called within the next hour she'd tell him what had happened.

He did not call.

Therefore Connie, hurrying to get into her green jersey sport dress next morning, to reach the office by 9 o'clock, tossed her copper head skyward when she thought of Bob and decided there was nothing she needed to explain to that young man. He might have telephoned!

She reached the office and was busy at her desk when the manager arrived.

"Good morning, Miss Norton. Tired from last night?"

"Oh, no. I'm not tired today. Did you tell me there was another paragraph to be added to this schedule before I cut the stencil?"

"Let's see what you have there."

The day's work in the office of the Riviera theatre had begun.

It was new work and therefore interesting. Two or three times during the morning Connie thought about Bob. She was petulant still because he did not telephone. Her mood was not charitable enough to admit that Bob might not have received her message.

In the middle of the afternoon, Morgan introduced the new girl who was to take Connie's place among the ushers. Her name was Mary Loring. Connie thought the girl was attractive.

"Is your home in the city?" Connie asked.

"Oh no. I've just been here three weeks. Mornings I go to business college but I've been looking for a job ever since I came. It is going to be awfully nice here at the theatre, I think."

"Well, I certainly hope you'll like it. We'll have to go to dinner together some evening."

"That would be lovely! I don't know many people. You see I've always lived in a small town before——"

"So have I," laughed Connie. "We'll have a lot to talk about."

She made a mental note that she must try to be nice to this Loring girl. Mary Loring looked the sort of person Connie liked. Their conversation was interrupted by Morgan, asking Connie to find a letter in the file.

When she had first met Michael Morgan Connie told herself she liked him because he was so strictly impersonal and business-like. Now, working in the same office with him everyday, she was beginning to think she liked him because he wasn't always business-like. Morgan had a way with employees which made them feel they were working with instead of for him.

Connie left the theatre that evening shortly before 6 o'clock. She had dinner at a cafeteria downtown and took the car home. An hour later she was sitting reading a magazine love story when she was called to the telephone.

"Hello. Yes, this is Miss Norton."

It was Bob speaking. As soon as she heard his first words Connie bristled.

"Well—I telephoned you last night. Didn't you get the message?"

Whatever he answered didn't seem to help matters.

"Why no, I didn't change my mind. What makes you ask that?"

"Well—of course, if you'd rather jump to con-

clusions than listen, if you don't want to believe what I'm telling you—if you think——"

The girl's words were interrupted by others, evidently equally incensed from the other end of the line.

But Constance Norton didn't have red hair for nothing. Her disposition blazed as bright as her radiant locks.

"See here, Bob Knight, if you think things like that about me I don't see why you want to talk to such a girl! Yes—that's exactly what I said and I mean it! Maybe sometime you'll find out everything isn't always exactly the way you think it is. I don't care WHAT you want to tell me now. No—good night!"

She jammed the receiver into place, ran up the stairs and by the time she had reached her own room gave up the struggle.

It was a good, long, hard cry.

Bob Knight had called her a "little flirt." He had said he hoped she enjoyed dangling men around and breaking dates and double-crossing them. Yes, he had said all those things! He actually had! And a lot worse. Without giving her a single chance to explain he had believed the worse.

Oh dear, oh dear, oh dee-ar!

The girl who lay with tear-streaked cheeks was far from rational enough to admit there might be something said for Bob's view of the case. She overlooked a number of past experiences which—at least to some persons—might seem grounds for making charitable allowances for Bob.

Connie had been misjudged. She resented this.

Finally when there didn't seem to be any good reason to go on letting her eyes get swollen and red and her pillow damper Connie arose to put cold water on her face.

She was relieved and quieted now. Anyhow Bob would get all over it and she could make him apologize in a day or two.

Connie spent the rest of the evening writing a letter to her parents. Then she took a hot bath, pulled down the covers and slipped into bed.

She confidently expected that Bob would telephone her at the office early next morning to apologize. She decided to hear his explanations with frigid dignity. It would be an excellent lesson for him.

The only flaw in this plan was the fact that Bob failed to call up. Neither did he telephone on Wednesday, nor Thursday, nor Friday.

Saturday afternoon was her holiday and Connie Norton could tolerate this silence no longer. She walked into a telephoe booth, took down the receiver and asked for Bob's number.

Again she heard a woman's voice.

"I want to speak to Bob Knight," answered Connie. "Tell him—it's Miss Norton."

"Mr. Knight, did you say?"

"Yes—Bob Knight."

"Sorry but he isn't here, ma'am. Mr. Knight packed up and left last night. I don't know for sure but I think he's left the city.

Connie put up the receiver.

CHAPTER XXIV

CHRISTMAS NIGHT

The Christmas lights twinkled dazzlingly on the snow as Connie Norton stepped through the theatre door. It was six o'clock and Connie was leaving her day's work. Four more days now until Christmas!

A great green and red wreath of electric bulbs hung directly in the center of the street intersection. Radiating to four corners were ropes of evergreen twined with glittering electric stars. The snow was crisp and firm underfoot. The wind was cold.

Everything that might have been done to awaken a cheerful spirit of Yuletide seemed to have been taken care of.

It was all unnoticed by Connie Norton.

She would walk to the cafeteria where she usually had dinner, later board the street car and ride to her rooming house. The evening would be spent alone in her room.

What a cheering holiday prospect!

Connie might have gone to dinner that evening with Michael Morgan but she had refused. She had been finding excuses lately instead of accepting Morgan's invitations. The three last invitations, to be specific. Well, she'd probably HAVE to accept the next one. A girl can't work for a

man and be continually treating him like that.

She knew from her Mother's letters that Bob Knight had returned to Monroe Junction. Connie supposed he would stay there. At any rate he'd never want anything more to do with her.

"No," Connie thought bitterly, as she walked under the Christmas stars. "I guess they both hate me now. Gene and Bob! A few weeks ago I thought it was up to me to decide which I cared most for. Now I haven't got—anybody."

One particularly bright red star down the block kept twinkling right in her eyes. The red star fascinated her.

"Hate you—hate you!" the star taunted back at Connie.

Yes, they hated her—both of them. That wasn't the worst of it. Connie hated herself. She really had misused Bob over and over again. And Gene! She didn't know how but in some way she must have hurt Gene terribly.

He didn't care about her anymore. Neither did Bob.

It really didn't look as though this Christmas could be much of a success. Connie went into the cafeteria, picked up tray, napkin, silver and walked down the line past the counters of food.

She didn't care about eating. A baked potato, glass of milk and salad was what she chose.

Back in Monroe Junction Mother was probably making mince meat and Christmas cookies. The fruit cake must have been ready two weeks ago.

Connie glanced about the room to see where to take her tray. She noticed a deserted table and went to it.

The dishes were arranged before her and she

had taken the first sip of milk when she happened to glance up.

Someone was coming toward her across the room.

"Miss Norton—may I sit here with you?"

"Why, certainly! Glad to have you!"

It wasn't the truth though. Misery such as Connie felt loves its own better than any other company. Her usual friendliness, however, had won out.

The girl who drew out the chair opposite and sat down was Mary Loring, the new usher.

"Four more days until Christmas," Mary said brightly.

"Yes—I've been thinking about that. Are you making plans to celebrate?"

"Oh no. I'll have to work all day. They say it's the busiest day of the whole year. Anyhow I'd rather work than not."

"Ever spend Christmas in the city before?"

"No. I've never even been away from home before."

"Neither have I," said Connie.

The undercurrent of sympathy and mutual liking which Connie had sensed the first time she saw Mary Loring grew stronger. Here was another girl like herself—but apparently braver, more cheerful.

"Where did you live before you came to the city?" asked Connie.

She heard the tale, the usual one of a girl whose family was rooted in a small town lacking the opportunities and glamorous surroundings the daughter craved. It sounded exactly as Connie herself would have talked six months before.

Mary was thrilled to be in the city. She was getting "a great kick" out of every new experience—even the meals which could be squeezed out of a seventy-five cents daily allowance for food.

"I'm ten times better off than she is!" Connie told herself. "Oh, I ought to be ashamed of myself."

"Listen, Mary," she said. "I've got an idea how you and I can celebrate Christmas day. We'll have dinner together. Oh yes, we will! It's going to be my party. You don't start work until 1 o'clock do you? Well—meet me here at 12 and we'll have dinner. That will be fine for me because I'm only working until 12 o'clock and then I get the afternoon off."

The Christmas spirit—aroused at last—went further. Connie bought a lovely blue and gray scarf for her Mother and a book she was sure Father would like. These were wrapped and tied in the gayest holiday colors before they were mailed to Monroe Junction.

She bought cards and sent one to Maxine Fisher and one to Bob Knight. She thought a long time on the subject and then, instead of sending Gene Norton a card, wrote a letter. It was a letter lacking the affection of six weeks before but still its tone was Connie's own. She reviewed her experiences of the past weeks, hoped he had been well and would be glad to hear from him.

At the last minute she felt she couldn't send it —no letter at all would be better than one like that.

Then, before she might change her mind again,

Connie had pulled on her coat and run down the street to a mailbox, dropped in the letter, and returned to ponder what its result might be.

In her sudden burst of good feelings toward all the world she accepted Morgan's invitation to have dinner with him Christmas night. She could do that since she was dining with Mary Loring at noon. Spending the evening with Morgan would be better than sitting around moodily at home.

So the three days before Christmas passed.

Christmas itself was a crisp, bright day. Connie worked through the morning, met Mary Loring shortly after 12 o'clock and together they enjoyed roast turkey with oyster dressing, gravy, sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce and plum pudding.

Mary was so cheerful, naive and outspoken all at the same minute that Connie couldn't help being amused by her.

At 1 o'clock she left her with "Merry Christmas" ringing in her ears. Mary had been saying it to everyone.

There were three packages waiting for Connie at home and several cards forwarded from Monroe Junction. The big box held a woolly bathrobe which Mrs. Marsh had made her daughter and black satin mules lined with blue. Connie thought the mules were darling! The smallest box contained lacy lingerie from Maxine. The medium sized package was from an elderly aunt who lived in California. The tin held candied fruits which were delicious.

No, Connie couldn't feel slighted. All her

Christmas gifts were lovely and they were twice as precious as the same things would have been one year ago.

She slipped into the lovely warm bathrobe, curled up on the bed and lay there a long time.

At 6:30 Morgan came for her.

Connie met him in the hallway wearing a small green hat (a new one) dashingly drawn down over her head, a green velvet frock (it was not new), bronze satin slippers with gossamer hose.

These were the incidental features of Connie's appearance. The main points were a tendril or two of coppery silk which would NOT be subdued under the hat's close crown, a pair of sapphire eyes deep with dreams, and as tantalizing a rose-bud mouth as an artist ever wished.

Distinctly "in the modern manner" and one hundred per cent effective.

That was Connie Norton, looking her best not because she wanted to charm a man but because tonight was Christmas night when all the world should forget sorrows and be very brave and very, very gay.

Morgan was distinctly impressed. "Gosh, what a girl!"

And Connie was thrilled as she entered the luxurious hotel dining room. It was a radiant scene of holiday gaiety with the great silvery Christmas tree in the center of the room, roses and mellow, gleaming candles on each snowy table. Crystal and silver and all about so many beautifully dressed diners.

No wonder Connie caught her breath and felt a bit uncertain.

She smiled across at Michael Morgan.

"It's so grand I can't believe this is really me," she said.

"It is or I've made the greatest mistake of my lifetime."

The dinner was a long one. Connie had no idea what several of the dishes were. She barely tasted the foods though everything was appetizing. For her the pageantry of the meal had more appeal than its gastronomic excellence.

It was while she was experimenting with a frozen salad that the girl became aware of Morgan's eyes fastened on her with a new light. She heard him saying:

"Miss Norton—Connie—why didn't you tell me you were—married?"

CHAPTER XXV

AN IMPORTANT DECISION

So Morgan knew all that had happened last fall!

Connie's flaming upper lip quivered. A warm flush of color rose in her cheeks and then faded.

"What—what do you want me to tell you?" she asked in a small voice. "How does it matter —now?"

The man across the table must have guessed a little of what it was costing her to speak.

"Oh, I'm sorry—I really didn't mean—you mustn't let what I said bother you, Miss Norton."

Immediately when he called her "Miss Norton" both of them became confused again. Morgan evidently thought it was up to him to set things right. He hesitated, then said:

"I shouldn't have spoken about it—tonight. I beg your pardon. You see you've caught on with the work in the office so well—though—well, I happened to come across Rose Carter the other day. You told me she sent you to the Riviera in the first place so I stopped to let her know how well you're getting along. Rose happened to mention that you were the Connie Norton of that trial last fall. She was surprised to find I didn't know that. That's—about all I guess."

Connie eyed him silently. The Christmas gladness had vanished from her face.

"Listen," Morgan continued, "I didn't want to remind you of things that—well, maybe you don't want to think about. I'm sorry I said anything. Just—forget it!"

It was nice of him to try to make things easier for her. Connie appreciated that. But since the subject had arisen it would be better to go through with it.

"You might as well know all about it," Connie said.

She told him why she had come to Chicago and how Rose Carter had helped her, cautioning her against using Gene's name.

"She told me lots of places wouldn't hire married women," Connie explained. "It wasn't that I wanted—to forget Gene. It's just—well, it's terrible to have people looking at you and talking about you and saying things all the time. That's why I didn't want anyone to know."

Michael Morgan had listened attentively.

"Have you seen your husband recently?" he asked.

Connie always felt a stab when she heard that word "husband" in reference to Gene. It seemed to emphasize her loneliness.

"No. I went to see him once—the time I traded my holiday with one of the other ushers. He didn't want to see me."

She couldn't tell from Morgan's expression what his thoughts may have been at that. The theatre manager could be enigmatic when he chose. Now Morgan began to talk about affairs at the theatre.

But fifteen minutes later, over the coffee, Morgan returned to Connie's marital affairs.

"Don't you think Miss Norton (and this time he said it without a trace of embarrassment) that you owe it to yourself to—well, cut loose from all those unpleasant associations of last fall?"

"Why yes. That's what I'm trying to do!"

"I know—but I mean, well, don't you think you'd be better off if you tried to start all over again?"

"How?"

"Are you going to divorce Norton?"

Clear, calm and unemotional his words were. Connie was surprised to find she didn't fly to Gene's defense as she would have a few months ago. She tried to. She said:

"Oh no. I couldn't do that! I couldn't desert him now when everyone's against him."

"Nonsense. That isn't the way to look at it. You've got to think about yourself. Besides—how much good are you doing him? Does he write to you?"

"Well—sometimes. I sent him a Christmas letter——"

"All right. Wait and see what kind of an answer you get. Heaven knows, it's a fine thing to find one woman brave enough to stand by a man when he's down. But you're going too far! You did all you could for him last fall. Don't be a glutton for punishment! Now what I'm saying to you is all for your own good—the way any impersonal judge would look at this thing."

Connie replied that all that might be true but still she couldn't desert Gene.

Nevertheless, Morgan's words stayed with

her. Connie thought of them afterward as they watched a play. She thought of them later when she was home in her own room, slipping from the green velvet dress and putting it back on its hanger.

She sat with one bronzed slipper poised on her toe—its dainty heel flopping into space—and reviewed what Michael Morgan had said.

No, there was no use to think about it. But oh—if Gene only would write once in a while!

Connie pulled off the slippers, tucked them away and donned yellow pajamas. Fifteen minutes later she was fast asleep.

The next day when Mary Loring arrived she brought a poinsetta plant for Connie's desk. It was a small one but its single flaming blossom was gorgeous.

"I hoped you'd like it," the girl said. "It's so bright and cheerful looking—just the way you are."

Connie could scarcely believe her ears! Of all people in the world she seemed to be the last to be described as "bright and cheerful looking."

But Mary Loring was too guileless to speak sarcastically. The flamboyant red blossom remained on Connie's desk and made that day brighter.

Later when she thought about the price of poinsettas (even at the cut-rate florists' shops) and Mary's seventy-five cent daily allowance for food she felt guilty. She would have to find some way to make that up to the girl.

Two days after Christmas a long letter arrived from Mrs. Marsh. It was a review of Christmas

Day in Monroe Junction. Connie realized as she read it that the holiday must have been as sombre and lonely for her parents as for herself. They seemed to be pleased with the gifts she had sent. Mrs. Marsh insisted the new scarf was the prettiest she had ever seen.

"We went to church," Mrs. Marsh wrote. "Maxine sang a solo and her voice certainly sounded sweet. Afterward she and Bob walked home with us. I see them going past the house quite often together now. Maxine doesn't seem to be going around with Ted Forbes any more. At least he don't come by with her like he used to. She said you sent her a pretty card and she was going to write to you."

"Bob and Maxine."

The girl holding the letter stared out the window. She knew her mother hadn't dreamed what those words would mean. Well—why not? Maxine had always liked Bob, always told Connie what a good dancer he was and how good looking and things like that. It would be fine for both of them. Maxine was the sort of a girl Bob Knight ought to fall in love with.

Connie told herself those things but they didn't seem to ease the pain which comes inevitably from learning another person has slipped into your place.

Maybe you didn't even want the place before. You want it after that, though.

Well, there was work to do in the world and Connie Norton was one of those who must do it. She spent that evening just as usual, reading the evening paper, bathing fifty strokes with the hair

brush for her tangled curls and finally slipped into bed.

The next day she attacked every duty at the Riviera Theatre with such energy that Morgan told her she was liable to work herself out of a job.

Grimly, Connie informed herself it was a good thing she could work. That was all she was good for anyhow!

Evidently young Michael Morgan didn't agree with her. He asked Connie to have dinner with him next evening and she agreed. Somehow since Morgan knew about her personal problems (at least a part of them) she felt more friendly toward him. It meant there was someone she could consult if things should suddenly get too frightening.

Night after night Connie came into the front hall of her rooming house and looked for two letters which failed to arrive.

Ten days after Christmas she found the first one waiting.

It was a letter bearing the prison stamp. She tore open the envelope and read this brief message:

"Dear Connie: Thank you for the Christmas letter. Everything is going along as usual here. I hope you are beginning to like Chicago by this time. It is a great city. I suppose you have met plenty of people to show you a good time. Well —we are only young once so go ahead. That is what I would do. Wishing you a happy New Year.

Gene."

Less than a page! And it was the only letter he had written her in two months.

Connie looked at the brief paragraph and thought of all the dear, precious words she had hoped to find. Not a word to say that he cared for her! Not a word to tell why he had refused to see her the time she had made the trip! Not a single sentence to remind her that she was his wife and that he loved her!

Oh, what was the use of it all, anyhow?

Connie wiped the tears from her cheeks, folded the page and placed it back in its envelope. Then she sat a long while studying the pattern of the wall paper.

It had turned out exactly as Michael Morgan had said. "Wait and see what kind of a letter you get." Those were Morgan's words. She couldn't very well forget them or anything else he had said to her that night talking about Gene.

"Wait and see what kind of a letter you get."

Suddenly Connie jumped up from the chair and began pulling out dresser drawers, dumping and rearranging their contents. She had to do something. She couldn't stand being quiet.

Yes, and she was tired of quiet waiting other ways too. There was no sense sitting around wasting perfectly good months and years. There was no SENSE in it. Even Gene wrote "We're only young once."

Connie worked swiftly at her task of folding and replacing piles of silk stockings, lingerie, blouses. It had become settled in her mind.

Morgan had been right and Morgan would help her. Connie had made up her mind about Gene.

CHAPTER XXVI

BRIDGES BURNED

When Connie Norton opened her eyes the next morning she saw a snow storm outside the window. Lovely, gentle, downy flakes falling to cover the ground below.

Connie pulled her blue bathrobe about her, went to the window and stood looking out.

The big, cottony flakes were like velvet, like soft feathery bird wings. But if one fell on your bare hand it would be cold and wet. It would melt away. There seemed to be many things in life like the snowflakes.

Connie dressed and made her way to the theatre, stopping at a lunch counter for the inevitable cup of coffee and a sweet roll. She was aware of a strange sense of awakened interest in surroundings this morning. It was as though she had suddenly come to the end of a long, dark tunnel and was surprised to find the sunlight so fresh, so bright.

Life was going to be interesting once more.

With all her heart and soul Connie wanted it to be interesting. She had endured all she could of drifting. Here she was—married and yet not married. A wife and no wife.

Besides that Gene hated her. Otherwise he would never, never treat her as he had.

Having made up her mind to divorce Gene Nor-

ton she waited two days before taking action. It was just as well Connie told herself, to plan things slowly.

It would have been simplest, no doubt, to sit down and write a letter to her father asking him to have Jim Guthrie start the suit. Connie knew the legal dissolution of her marriage would not be difficult. Guthrie had told her that. So had her father.

But writing to Alexander Marsh meant admitting that all along her father had been right and she had been wrong in leaving home. Connie wasn't quite ready for that.

Michael Morgan was the first person to hear the news.

She had gone with him to dinner the night before. Morgan had been entertaining, solicitous, everything a girl could wish in an escort. He had not presumed upon their office relationship. He never did. It was because Connie felt so sure there was nothing sentimental in their friendship that she decided Morgan would be the person to confide in.

She hadn't really meant to tell him though, in the way it came about.

At 5 o'clock in the afternoon there were still letters to type. Connie's shorthand notebook lay open beside her. There was a fresh white sheet of paper in her typewriter.

She was ready for work when suddenly she realized that for what must have been a long time she had been gazing at the blank wall before her. Morgan was saying something.

"Oh yes, Mr. Morgan—" Connie roused herself. "I—beg your pardon!"

"It was that check to Peerless Publicity I asked about. Did you send it?"

"Yes, I put it in the mailbox when I went out at noon."

The girl's cheeks flushed as she bent over her notebook an instant and then began to type. She had an uncomfortable feeling that Morgan had been looking at her for quite a while before he had spoken.

Again she recalled herself from reverie. She finished the letter, started another and found herself staring again at the wall.

Morgan had taken his hat and coat from the rack near the door. He walked over beside Connie's desk and looked down at her.

"Are you—worried about anything, Miss Norton?"

"Why no! Nothing. Oh, no!"

"I just meant that if there's anything I could do—any way I might be of help—well, I'd be glad to——"

"I guess I'd better hurry and get these letters out."

Connie's eyes must have contradicted the words her lips spoke. The man was watching her eyes.

"Let the letters go until tomorrow," Morgan told her. "What's it all about anyhow?"

He had pulled up a chair, thrown his coat over the back of it and sat down twirling his hat.

"But I mustn't—I can't talk about personal affairs when I'm supposed to be working."

"Go ahead and tell me what's on your mind."

The girl sitting before the typewriter looked at him for several moments. Then she said:

"Well—I'm going to get a divorce."

Morgan's eyebrows lifted slightly. He waited for her to continue.

"I've made up my mind at last," Connie told him. "The other night I got a letter from Gene. He doesn't care anything about me anymore and I can't go on living this way any longer. I guess he'll be glad to have me do it. He wouldn't—wouldn't even see me that other time you know. Anyhow it's settled now."

"Have you talked to a lawyer?"

The question seemed to startle Connie.

"No, not yet. There's a lawyer at home—he's a friend of my father's and knows all about the case. I thought I'd write home and have father talk to him."

"Well, I think you're doing the right thing—exactly. Listen, why don't you buck up and get that letter off to your folks and then just forget about it? Put the whole thing out of your mind entirely. Write them right away—tonight—and be through with it."

Morgan arose to leave and then came back to Connie's desk. He put a hand lightly on her shoulder.

"You're—an awfully good kid, Connie. You deserve lots more than you've gotten out of life."

She knew he was trying to be comforting. Connie looked up and a misty glow veiled the lovely blue eyes.

She felt the hand on her shoulder pressing a little more firmly.

"Thank you, Mr. Morgan," Connie said. "I—I think I'll try to get the letters out now."

"No reason why they can not wait until morning."

She was busy with a square of blue handkerchief.

"I think I'll feel better if I finish them tonight."

"Well, suit yourself about it. If I'm not back before you leave will you turn on the lock?"

Connie agreed. She had the office to herself a moment later.

For a half hour she worked uninterruptedly on Morgan's letters. It was ten minutes after six when they were all finished and laid out neatly upon his desk.

She sat down at her typewriter then and looked at it. Now would be as good a time as any to write her father. How should she say it?

Connie slipped the paper into the carrier of her machine and sat gazing at it steadily.

Five minutes later she was writing furiously. She signed her name to the finished sheet, folded it, placed it in a stamped envelope and very soon after that dropped it into a mail box.

Later Connie arrived home and spent the evening washing out lingerie and hose.

She remembered her intention to try to do something for Mary Loring and asked Mary next day when she would have a free evening.

"Next Friday," Mary told her.

"Won't you have dinner with me Friday then? We can slip in some place and see a movie afterward."

"Why yes, I'd love to!"

"Then stop here for me Friday about 6 o'clock and that's what we'll do."

The arrangement gave Connie something to which to look forward. She felt quite metro-

politan Friday evening piloting Mary Loring through the streets. She led her to a tearoom which Connie had visited with Bob. Later, after they had finished dinner, she couldn't help being amused by Mary's wide-eyed wonder at her first view of a famous motion picture theatre.

"Oh, isn't it wonderful!"

"Yes, it certainly is. Did you notice how thick these carpets are?—and just look at that mirror."

Later Connie persuaded Mary to stay with her for the night instead of taking a long car ride alone. They took the street car home at 10:30 and an hour later Mary, in borrowed pajamas, was snuggling underneath the covers.

Connie arose next morning and went to work, leaving the alarm clock set for 10:30 which was Mary's usual waking time.

There was a letter waiting for Connie when she came back to the rooming house at 7 o'clock that evening. She failed to see it until she was inside her room and switched on the electric light. Then she noticed the little oblong of white paper on the floor where it had been pushed under the door. She reached down and held the envelope up to the light.

There was a prison stamp in one corner. Connie tore off the end of the envelope and drew out this message:

"Dear Connie: If there is anything you want to see me about and you can come down here next Wednesday afternoon they will let me talk to you any time between 1 and 5:30. You had better send a letter saying whether or not you will come.

Sincerely, Gene."

She must do it now! She must! There could be no turning back after that. Gene probably was willing and eager to have her divorce him. She hadn't told him in her own letter exactly what she wanted to see him about but of course he must have guessed.

Connie sat down at once and wrote the note saying she would come. She knew Morgan would arrange to let her off work Wednesday.

Then with the letter in a stamped envelope Connie left the house and deposited it in a mail box near by.

Now all her bridges were burned!

The following Wednesday afternoon Connie Norton followed a blue coated prison official down a long hallway leading into a bright, square room. Along one side of this room there was a screened off enclosure and near this were benches.

Connie sat down on a bench. She waited a long while and then she heard a door open. Someone was coming toward her behind the screen.

Now she would tell him!

CHAPTER XXVII

MORGAN PROTESTS

It was a tremulous little cry which Connie Norton uttered as she gazed at her husband. She had taken two steps forward at sight of him and was standing there now—held by his dark eyes, by blind emotions gripping and twisting her soul.

There was Gene—HER Gene—and yet he seemed so far away!

Why didn't he say something? Then she remembered that he hated her.

A flashing transformation had taken place in Gene Norton. Coming through the doorway he had caught sight of Connie and a warm glow spread over his face. Another minute and it had vanished. He stood watching her, separated from her by the screen partition, waiting for her to speak.

The guard beside Connie moved restively. His motion broke the spell.

Connie turned toward the guard.

"Aren't you—aren't you going to let me GO to him?" she begged.

The prison official answered the girl's appeal calmly.

"Guess you can go in for a few minutes." He slipped a key into the lock and turned it.

Then she was beside Gene, near enough to touch him.

Connie held out two hands.

"Well—I'm here!" she said trying to smile because what she really wanted to do was to cry. "Aren't you glad to see me, Gene?"

He had not shifted his eyes from her for a moment. It was as though Gene Norton were trying to devour the girl with those dark blazing eyes of his. For an instant his glance wavered from her face to the little white hands she held forth.

Gene took them.

It was over very quickly, very abruptly. Barely had she felt his lips, felt Gene's arms close and warm about her, his cheek upon her cheek and surrendered herself to the glory of it before Gene held her away again.

He said something about "keeping their heads" and "saying what ever there was to say."

Connie tried to answer because he was waiting for an answer.

"I—don't want to talk. I just want to look at you, Gene."

Searching dark eyes watched her guardedly.

"Do you mean—you came down here just to see me?"

Connie nodded. Maybe it WASN'T the truth but she couldn't tell him that. She couldn't for the life of her say anything to Gene about a divorce now. She couldn't hurt him.

Again, half timidly, Connie held out her hands to him.

Norton took both the small white hands in one of his, absent-mindedly patting them. But now as he stood looking at her the man's face became mask-like.

"Here, Connie," he said suddenly, "here—sit down!" He pushed a chair toward her.

She didn't want to sit down. She wanted to be held close in Gene's arms but she had to do as he directed.

"You're—sure there wasn't anything else you wanted to talk about?"

Again Connie shook her head. It seemed queer. There they were, only a couple of feet apart, but something had happened which was keeping them miles distant. Gene didn't look at all the way he used to. Those queer clothes, of course, made a difference. There was something about his hair too that was wrong.

It was Gene's eyes which were strangest of all. Four months couldn't possibly change the color or shape of a man's eyes, of course. It must have been something having nothing to do with color or shape that was different.

The guard stepped nearer to say they had only two minutes more together.

"Everything going all right with you?" Gene wanted to know.

"Oh yes."

"Seen your Father and Mother lately?"

"No. Not since November."

What was the use of talking about things like that? It seemed though the only way there was to talk. Connie tried to go on:

"Have you been all right, Gene?"

"Yes. Sure."

"Gene—will you write to me?"

"Sure. I'll write to you. Don't worry about me, though, Connie. I'm getting along all right. But you want to look out for yourself. That's

the main thing. You know I wish you'd go back to Monroe Junction where your parents are."

Suddenly there were a million other important things to say but it was no use. The two minutes were ended!

Gene did not kiss her—He took the girl's hands in a firm clasp—just a hand clasp.

After that he went away and Connie found herself walking down the hallway behind the tall slim guard.

The sensation of unreality about her persisted until after Connie was on the train. Then she sat watching the moving landscape, remembering she was on her way back to Chicago.

She had seen Gene.

And she must never, never let him know the reason she had made the trip. How could she ever for one moment have thought about a divorce? Poor Gene!

She couldn't divorce him now, Connie told herself, because Gene needed her. Oh, he must need her! How could any man endure that horrible prison existence without feeling that somewhere, someone was waiting for him, loving him?

Gene had been there now four months. Only four months! She heard the judge's words still ringing in her ears: "Imprisonment in the state penitentiary for not less than one nor more than three years."

How long would it be? How long would it be? Could she possibly wait three whole years?

For almost the first time a full realization of what it was going to mean to wait for Gene's release came to the girl. Could she do that?

"I mustn't think about myself," Connie told

herself. "I mustn't think about myself. It's so much harder for Gene."

There was no solution at all to this tangle. She wondered drearily if there ever would be. Gene was serving his sentence behind prison bars. Connie had to serve hers, no matter where she moved.

"It isn't love," the girl went on to herself. "I don't think it's love now, but I know that he needs me."

Connie had good cause to rehearse her arguments and explain her weakness. Telling herself she was in duty bound to stand by Gene Norton was one thing. Repeating all this to Michael Morgan who had developed such an interest in his secretary's affairs was quite another.

In the morning when she reached the office the Riviera theatre's business was suspended until Morgan had heard Connie's report of her trip. He failed entirely to understand.

"But I thought you said you didn't love him any more?"

"I—don't!" insisted Connie. "Don't you see it's my duty to stand by him? Gene NEEDS me now!"

Morgan eyed her cynically.

"I guess that's applesauce. I guess you're just still crazy about that guy!"

It was hard to hear him talk that way.

Bitterly offended, Connie turned away. After one of those pauses in which a few moments can pass in review a whole lifetime she found her voice.

"Have you—any work for me this morning, Mr. Morgan?"

He ignored her question. Morgan's voice had become apologetic when he spoke:

"Excuse me, Miss Norton. I beg your pardon. I shouldn't have spoken that way, but Connie—don't you understand? Don't you see this means a lot to me? Don't you know I'm—I'm crazy about you?"

"Mr. Morgan!"

"Connie if you'll only give me the chance, get rid of this fellow—I know I can make you happy. I know I can. Won't you give me a chance, dear? I didn't mean to say it like this but I've got to!"

Connie Norton was on her feet.

"Mr. Morgan," she said wearily, "I think you'll have to find another secretary. I don't believe I'll be able to work this morning."

"That's all right. Take the day off. Go home and rest. You look all in. Can I see you tonight though?"

"I don't know!"

With the earth still rocking violently Connie Norton reached her rooming house. She couldn't go back to the Riviera theatre and work for Michael Morgan after this. She would have to find a new job.

Oh, how a few minutes can crash one's universe!

Noon came and Connie got out her hat and coat again. She ought to eat something. She ought to buy a newspaper and read the want ads. She recoiled from the thought of job hunting. It had to be done, though! Yes, it had to be done.

Mechanically, Connie Norton took the street car. She got off on Wabash street and walked to a cafeteria. She selected something to eat, bore the tray to a secluded table and set it down

there. Nothing looked appetizing. She didn't want to eat anything.

And then something happened to drive all thoughts of food from Connie's mind.

She glanced up and realized with a shock who was coming toward her.

CHAPTER XXVIII

GOOD FOR EVIL

Connie didn't need to look twice to identify the woman coming toward her. Flo West! Could she NEVER avoid that creature?

The same wretched uneasiness which came over her every time she saw Flo overwhelmed her now. Connie would have liked to rise from the table with her luncheon spread upon it and run away. She wanted to hide.

But there was no way of avoiding the oncomer. No way at all.

"Howjado, Mis' Norton. Mind if I sit down a minute?"

Flo didn't look as prosperous as when Connie had seen her last. She wore a coat of black and gray plaid stuff in a cheap, conspicuous pattern. The wide brimmed satin hat suggested it had seen better days. But the costume was not the only index. Connie remembered a sinuous, self-confident young woman whose dark eyes were glamorous. Those eyes today looked dull. Flo's make-up in the bright mid-day light looked a little coarse. She must be either tired or worried.

It was very uncomfortable for Connie Norton to look across the table and see Flo there. She didn't like to begin eating.

"Go on with your chow, kid," Flo West was

saying. "So long as you're eating they won't say anything about my bein' here."

"Aren't you going to have lunch?" Connie asked.

The satiric smile in answer to that question was humorless. Flo shrugged a shoulder.

"No money—no lunch!" she said.

"You mean you haven't enough money for food?"

Yes, that was what Flo meant. Another shoulder movement confirmed this.

"Go up to the counter," directed Connie. "Order as much food as you can eat and bring your tray back here to this table. I'll pay the check."

No sooner said than the invitation was acted upon. If it was hunger that made Flo West look wan she must have been going without food for quite a long while.

The woman came back with a tray loaded with pork chops, gravy, a baked potato, corn, salad, rolls, coffee and apple pie.

She placed it on the table.

"This is darned white of you," Flo said.

"You bought me a meal once," Connie reminded her.

"That's so. I'd forgotten. Listen—you didn't take that job I told you about over on the South Side, did you, girlie?"

"No—I didn't feel like making the trip that night and next morning I got a chance at another place that was nearer where I live."

Miss West was busy with the pork chops. She looked at Connie after a few minutes' silence and said:

"Kid, do you know this is the first real square meal I've had this week?"

It was a shocking thing to hear. Connie had always understood there were people in the world somewhere who occasionally had to go without food but she had never actually seen such a person. She didn't know what to say in answer to that, so she said nothing.

"Not only that," Flo went on, "but I couldn't even have come in here to rest a while and get warm if I hadn't seen you. I haven't—got the apartment any more. I haven't—got anything."

"You mean you haven't a place to stay?"

Flo shook her head negatively.

Connie was genuinely touched. She felt toward Flo West as complete loathing as she could feel toward any human. She could never forgive what Flo had done to Gene. She could never forgive Flo having known Gene.

But of course, she couldn't let a person suffer either.

The luncheon was finished in silence. Connie picked up the two checks, walked to the cashier's desk and paid them. A second later, standing in the entrance of the cafeteria, she turned to Flo.

"You'd better come home with me," said Connie abruptly.

She said it in a tone women have for announcing decisions which are unpleasant but nevertheless unalterable.

Together they boarded a street car and together they reached the rooming house twenty minutes later.

At the threshold of her own room Connie put the key in the latch and opened the door.

"Maybe you'd like to lie down and take a nap," she said to Flo. "I'll have to go out again but you can make yourself at home here."

"Gee—you're certainly treating me white," Flo replied.

Instead of going out of the house directly Connie walked down stairs to the parlor off the hallway. It was a public parlor for the use of all roomers. She sat there and scanned the afternoon newspaper which she had brought home.

"Help Wanted—Female." That was the column under which Connie began to read.

A half dozen want-ads, she checked. Then, stopping before a mirror to see that her hat was adjusted properly and giving a pat of powder to her nose, Connie walked out of the house and set forth on the trail of a new job.

She didn't find one.

Four of the places which she considered promising Connie visited. There was one place which she was unable to find and another that proved too far away to be reached before five o'clock.

Nobody she talked to wanted a girl of Connie's limited experience.

Two of the men agreed to put her name on their waiting list and telephone in case a vacancy occurred. The positions which these places had advertised were filled earlier in the day.

At 6 o'clock Connie sat down before a drug store lunch counter and called for a cheese on rye sandwich with a glass of milk. She paid for two other sandwiches, wrapped in waxed paper to take to Flo and left the place.

There was no light shining over the transom

of her room as she walked down the hallway. Flo must be still asleep.

Connie turned her key in the lock and pushed the door open.

There on the bed, sound asleep, lay Flo West.

The younger girl didn't awaken her. It was half an hour later that Flo sat up and rubbed her eyes. She devoured the sandwiches.

"Gee, but you've been good to me," Flo said. "You know I was just dead for sleep. And hungry? Honest I feel like a new woman. Yep—my luck's changed and I can feel it!"

Connie didn't confide to Flo that she herself had been tramping the streets looking for work.

Mrs. Whitaker kept two spare cots down the hallway. Connie went down to see the landlady and arranged to borrow a cot for the night. They set this up, put on sheets and covers and made things ready. The cot was for Flo.

Shortly before 9 o'clock a telephone call came for Connie. Afraid that it might be Michael Morgan the girl was half-determined not to answer. But that would be silly! She walked down the hallway and picked up the telephone receiver.

"Hello."

It WAS Morgan.

"Hello—Miss Norton?" she heard him saying.

"Yes, this is Miss Norton."

"Oh—Miss Norton, this is Morgan. I tried to reach you this afternoon but they told me you were out. I got word this morning after you left that I'm to go down and open the new theatre in Louisville. I'm leaving tomorrow morning. Mr. Curnin of the downtown office will take charge

at the Riviera. There are a number of things I should have gone over with you but I left an extensive memoranda on your desk. Curnin will be out tomorrow morning. I suggest that you get there ten or fifteen minutes early though. You know a lot more about the Riviera than Curnin does and he'll depend on you. I—I'm sorry I won't see you before getting away."

Connie said she was sorry too.

The whole thing put her brain in a muddle! She had considered that she had left the Riviera Theatre forever. But she couldn't—it wouldn't be right to quit now!

"I'll do the best I can, Mr. Morgan."

"Oh, you won't have any trouble. You'll find Curnin's a fine man to work for only of course, the place is strange to him. As soon as I get back I'll try to put through that raise for you. Hope you're feeling better tonight than you did this morning."

"Much better thank you."

"Glad to hear that. Well then—I guess that will be all."

"Goodbye," said Connie, "and good luck, Mr. Morgan."

"Thank you. Good night."

According to Morgan's suggestion, Connie was at the theatre next day at a quarter of an hour before nine o'clock. She had gone through the mail and was re-reading Morgan's memoranda when Curnin arrived.

She recognized him at once as a man who had been there to consult Morgan three or four times. He seemed agreeable and pleasant.

The first day everything went smoothly. Con-

nie had hopes that she would be able to satisfy her new superior.

When Connie had left her room at 8 o'clock in the morning, Flo West had still been sleeping. Connie hoped sincerely that she would find her gone at night. She had placed a one dollar bill on Flo's hat and tiptoed from the room.

Therefore she was more pleased than surprised as she switched one light that evening to find her room was deserted. Connie glanced about, pulled off her hat and heaved a sigh of relief. After all she had only done what was decent for Flo—but it wasn't so easy.

Suddenly her eye lighted on a large flat object upon the table. Heavens, it was Flo West's purse!

"She'll be back for it!" Connie moaned inwardly.

But it was not Flo who knocked on Connie's bedroom door three quarters of an hour later. Connie heard the loud knock, walked across the room, put her hand on the knob and pulled back the door.

In the hallway, staring at her, were two officers.

CHAPTER XXIX

ANOTHER MORNING

Behind the officers Connie could see the figure of the landlady, Mrs. Whitaker. The blue coated men nearly filled the doorway.

"Your name Norton?" asked one of them.

Wild-eyed, Connie nodded her head.

"Yes sir."

One of the men stepped through the doorway. Mrs. Whitaker immediately edged forward through the space he had left.

"It's that woman that was here with you yesterday," she said to Connie. "She went out this morning and came back again but I didn't see her leave after that. Ain't she here now?"

Connie wasn't permitted to reply. While the man in the hallway was telling Mrs. Whitaker to stop talking and leave them with the girl the other was investigating the room.

Connie stood bewildered.

"Are you—are you sure you want to see me?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss Norton. We're looking for a woman who came to this place this morning. Flo West she calls herself. Where is she?"

"I don't know."

"Now don't try to lie out of it. Where is she?"

Connie shook her head again in denial.

"I don't—I don't know anything about it. I haven't any idea where she is."

"Here when you came in tonight, wasn't she?"

"No."

It was at that moment that the other officer whirled around with an exclamation. He came over to his companion holding up his find.

"Here—look at this!"

It was Flo's purse.

They opened it and began pulling out an odd assortment of articles—keys, cards and letters, a lipstick, matches, a limp package which once had contained cigarettes and a handkerchief.

"Wait—here's something else!"

Connie and Mrs. Whitaker were watching intently from the background.

But there seemed to be nothing of importance in the other pocket of the purse.

Just then the policeman spoke excitedly:

"Well—here we are!"

He held up a small black box of the sort in which jewelry is sold, pulled off the lid. It was empty.

"Adams Brothers—Gems" read the policeman. He poked into the white satin lining of the case. There was certainly nothing hidden there.

"Let me take a look," said the other officer. He reached for the purse, searched it carefully again. There was nothing there.

Immediately the two men ransacked the whole room, turning it upside down, pulling out dresser drawers and upsetting things generally.

They questioned Connie. When did she last see Flo West? How did she happen to come here yesterday? Where did Connie say she worked? How

long had she known Flo? There were many other questions.

What they were hunting for, she gathered, was a jeweled bracelet which had been in the little black box. And now they had found the box—in Connie's room!

The girl's face was pallid. She was terrified. Never had Connie Norton committed an infringement of the law, yet within a few months she had become horrified of officers. And there was so much unexplainable in this present scene. Flo had disappeared. Had she stolen the bracelet?

"Well—you'll have to come along with us, Miss! Tell it to the judge," said the shorter of the two policemen. "Get your hat on!"

"Do I have to go now—tonight?"

"Say—what did you think we'd be waitin' for?"

Miserably Connie looked at Mrs. Whitaker. There was no sympathy in the landlady's face.

"Go right along with them," the woman said harshly. "It can't never be said I have any but respectable people in this house! Go right along with them——"

"But Mrs. Whitaker—you don't think——"

Connie was beginning to cry. If everybody was against her now how could she prove that SHE hadn't stolen the bracelet? How could she? Carrying her hat and pulling her coat on Connie walked down the hallway between the officers.

They reached an automobile parked at the curbside, got in and rode away.

Presently Connie Norton found herself before a red-cheeked police judge, telling him the whole story.

She explained where she had first seen Flo West. Yes, she was Gene Norton's wife. Yes—that same Norton. She told how Flo had declared she was hungry, that she didn't have money for food and no place to sleep through the night. She told the whole story and the judge let her tell it in her own way. Afterward a pompous looking man appeared, looked at Connie thoughtfully and said no, she certainly wasn't the girl.

Piecing scraps of information together Connie decided this man must be from the jewelry shop whence the bracelet had been stolen. It seemed Flo HAD stolen it.

The diamond bracelet was highly valuable.

Connie answered questions, repeated what she knew about Flo West, and could hardly believe her ears when she heard that she might go home.

"Dismissed!" said the judge.

"Oh then—you mean it's all right? I won't have to come back here again—or anything?"

The judge shook his head smiling.

"Not unless you fail to behave yourself!"

So a miserable night was ended. At last the girl was home in her own room. It was late. She undressed at once, put out the light and crept into bed. Oh—such a night!

When Connie awoke next morning it was with the perplexed sense that some unusual noise had been going on around her. Startled, she sat up in bed.

Somebody was knocking on the door.

Connie reached for her slippers, pulled a bathrobe around her and hurried to the door.

"Yes—who is it, please?"

"It's me—Mrs. Whitaker."

The girl turned the latch and opened the door. In bustled Mrs. Whitaker.

"Oh, just look at this, Miss Norton! Here, I couldn't wait—just look at this!"

She held out the morning newspaper. Blazing across two columns of the sheet was a picture of Connie and, in smaller space, a picture of Flo West and one of Gene. Above the paragraph she read in heavy black type:

CONVICT'S BRIDE BEFRIENDS "OTHER WOMAN": HELD FOR SHOP-LIFTING

"Miss Norton, why didn't you tell me? I never dreamed you was married! Why, I've seen your picture in the paper lots of times and here I never dreamed it could be you! You always called yourself 'Miss Norton.' I didn't dream you was married! Why didn't you tell me?"

But Connie had no answer. She was still staring at those awful pictures. The same, of course, that the newspaper had printed last fall during the trial.

She couldn't read the column of type. She didn't want to know what it said.

Suddenly Connie buried her face in a pillow. Her shoulders shook with her sobs.

"Why, now, Miss Norton—don't take on like that! I didn't mean to make you feel bad. I just thought you'd ought to see the paper. Here, you mustn't go cryin' so hard!"

Connie cried and cried nevertheless, until finally Mrs. Whitaker shrugged her shoulders and left the room. She closed the door behind her and Connie was grateful.

Presently the girl thought about the office. It must be growing late and what would Mr. Curnin say?

She glanced across the room at the clock. Eight-thirty!

She would never, never be able to reach the theatre by nine but she must get there as soon as possible. Connie jumped up, bathed her eyes and slipped into a frock. Within fifteen minutes she was boarding a street car. Without delaying for breakfast she hurried on to the Riviera.

If Mr. Morgan had been there she knew everything would have been all right.

But Morgan was not there now.

Instead Robert Curnin sat at Morgan's desk as Connie came in—twenty-five minutes late.

"Little late this morning, aren't you, Miss Norton?"

"I'm sorry—I overslept."

Curnin was silent for several minutes and Connie busied herself at her desk. She began to type a rough draft of next week's program.

"Oh, Mrs. Norton!"

The girl paled instantly. She turned about.

"Yes, Mr. Curnin?"

"This—this publicity all over the newspapers this morning—you've seen it, I suppose?"

"Yes sir."

"Bad for the theatre," he said, shaking his head disapprovingly. "Very bad. You noticed the article said you're employed here. Now we can't let patrons of the Riviera feel that when they come here they are in contact with the CRIMINAL classes——"

Connie Norton's red head shot into the air.

She didn't dream that devious office politics were behind Curnin's words—why, since it had been arranged to send Morgan to Louisville it would be particularly convenient to get rid of Morgan's secretary.

Connie only heard Curnin's words:

"—and so (he was saying to her) you can understand, I'm sure the importance of making a change. You may take the rest of this week to look for another position. Your check will be made out for the full week."

Connie wouldn't trust herself to speak. She arose, took hat and coat from the stand and without a word walked into the street.

Now she was fired!

CHAPTER XXX

WRONGED AND DEFIANT

Connie Norton faced about into the cold March wind and began walking briskly. The street car she should have taken clanged down the street unnoticed. It stopped at the intersection but Connie walked on as though she failed to see it.

The wind was sharp. It whipped against the girl's face and brought the color stinging to her cheeks. She had to duck her head and lean forward to make headway.

It was a relief to feel the cold wind though. Darkness was comforting too. Connie strode on, wishing she might overcome the storm in her heart as easily as the stormy night.

She had been walking, walking all that weary day looking for work and had found none.

"I'm fired!" Connie Norton reminded herself.

She had to remember that, first and foremost. A few days before she had been priding herself that she was succeeding as a private secretary. She had been told so repeatedly. Today she had just four more days in which to find a new job.

"You could go back to Monroe Junction," a small voice in the back of Connie's brain repeated.

Yes—and if she went back there it would mean submitting to everything her father wanted. Connie was perfectly certain about that. Her parents

would not be content until they had their way.

Going back would be the same as admitting she had failed. Well—hadn't she?

A flood of anger at Flo West, of blinding resentment toward life in general overwhelmed Connie. Why—she had tried to be kind to Flo! Shared her food, her room, given her money.

Now this was Flo's fault. Because of her Connie Norton was turned into the street.

On against the cold wind the girl staggered.

Gradually she began to realize that what she was doing was mad. If she kept on stumbling along through the snow she might even freeze. Her room was waiting for her. She had money in her purse. She didn't have to have that job at the Riviera theatre either! She would find work elsewhere.

Then she smiled grimly at a bitter thought. It had been Michael Morgan who had assured her she would find Curnin an agreeable superior!

Connie waited at the next corner for a street car. She was chilled through and stood first on one foot then on the other trying to keep warm.

Finally the car came. Connie boarded it and rode until the bright lights of the "Loop" shown around her.

An evening newspaper was her first purchase as soon as she left the car. With the paper under her arm she walked to the nearest restaurant.

She entered the place, found a table and sat down, scanning the menu card. She had given her order to the waitress before she unfolded the newspaper and sat back waiting for the food to be served.

Page one looked uninteresting. Connie should

have turned directly to the want ad section but a headline on the second page caught her eye. There she read in letters clear across the page:

"LIFE STORY OF CONNIE NORTON, BANDIT'S BRIDE, TOLD IN PICTURES."

It covered eight columns the full width of the paper. Below were several paragraphs, rehashing all that had appeared in print before of Connie's romance.

The girl looked at the pictures, slowly read each paragraph. Suddenly, eyes flashing, she laid down the newspaper. It was the same newspaper which had first sent a woman reporter to interview Connie.

Everything which had happened since had been that newspaper's fault! Every bit of it! If the newspaper hadn't started it the others wouldn't have gone ahead. Well—the editor should be satisfied! He'd lost everything for her—even her job.

Connie Norton never was one to bear her trials meekly. She had endured a good deal in silence. Suddenly now her mind was made up.

Without waiting for the food which she had ordered Connie pushed back her chair, arose and hurried from the restaurant.

She inquired of a policeman how to reach the newspaper office. Connie knew the address but in this neighborhood she felt confused. The officer gave her directions and Connie walked all the way. At every step her resentment grew.

She entered the big building. An elevator transported her to the editorial floor. There she

told a boy at the information desk she wished to see the editor.

"Which editor, ma'am?"

"I don't know exactly—I mean the one that runs the paper."

"What was it you wanted to see him about?"

"It's—about some pictures in tonight's paper."

"Oh well, I guess you'd better talk to Mr. Hughes. But he isn't here now."

"Will he be back?"

"Maybe. I don't know for sure. He might come in around seven o'clock if you care to wait."

Connie waited. Because she had come without eating and because she had been through a long weary day and because by this time she had reached a hysterical pitch that waiting was frenzy. She saw men come and go and whenever a different one approached and walked through the swinging gate leading to the editorial offices she looked questioningly at the boy behind the desk.

Each time he shook his head.

An hour and fifteen minutes later (nearly 7:30 o'clock) a man wearing a dark overcoat and cloth cap passed through the swinging gate. The boy beckoned to Connie.

"That's him," he told her. "I'll ring and see if you can go in now."

She found herself entering a small, square room. There were many pictures on the walls, a rug on the floor and all about books and files of newspapers in a cluttered condition.

A little hesitantly Connie looked toward the man seated at a roll top desk.

"Mr. Hughes?" Connie asked.

"Yes. My name's Hughes. Anything I can do for you?"

He spoke in a crisp, rapid manner. Mr. Hughes wore glasses with dark rims. His gray hair was touched at the sides with white. There was kindliness in that face and a weary air. The weariness had been put there by the thankless job of directing the destinies of a great newspaper, listening day by day to the woes of those who feel offended by its columns.

"What can I do for you?" Mr. Hughes said again, looking at the girl.

At that, without meaning to in the least, Connie Norton's eyes brimmed with tears. She coughed nervously. She was unable to speak. She moved toward a chair which was pointed out to her.

Presently very much ashamed of herself, Connie was able to look up and tell the managing editor her story.

"I—I don't suppose you meant to hurt me," she concluded, "I suppose newspapers just don't think sometimes how what they print can do to people. But—don't you see? It was because of the paper I had to leave home. Now it's because of the paper I've lost my job. And—well, I just don't see what I'm going to DO that's all!"

Hughes had been listening all the while without interrupting.

"And you think this newspaper is responsible for all your misfortunes?" he asked.

Connie nodded.

"You started it," she said. "I don't think the other papers would have been so bad, but you started it."

"Well, Mrs. Norton. I'm very sorry for you. Every day in the business of printing the news things come to light—and must be printed—which some individual considers harmful. Would you think that this newspaper had paid its debt, at least in part, if we could find you employment?"

Wiping the tears from her eyes Connie looked at him, not understanding.

"You mentioned Miss Carter, a moment ago," he went on. "I will talk to her tomorrow and see what we can do. You may expect Miss Carter to telephone you sometime during the day. Will you leave a number?"

Connie scribbled it down and handed it to the editor.

Five minutes later, she was on the street again. This time she found a restaurant, went in and ordered some food, finishing it to the last crumb.

A letter from Gene was waiting for Connie when she reached home. It contained nothing of importance but she went to sleep with the letter under her pillow and a dreamy smile.

She remained home all morning, waiting and hoping that Rose Carter would telephone.

The call came shortly after 1 o'clock.

"If you'll come down tomorrow morning," Miss Carter said, "there's a temporary job in the want ad department. I'm sure you could do the work all right."

Connie, delightedly, agreed to come down.

"Be here by 8 o'clock and ask for Mrs. Kane," Miss Carter directed. "You'll find her on the second floor."

Connie said many excited "thank-you's" and promised to arrive promptly on time.

More good news came in the afternoon mail. There was a letter at last from Maxine Fisher. Connie tore open the envelope excitedly and read:

"Dear Connie: I've been a terrible bum to take so long answering your lovely Christmas card but so many things have happened. So many important things! Connie dear, I want you to be the first to know that I'm going to be married the first week in June and you're to be matron of honor. Don't say you can't because you must! It's Bob—yes, Bob Knight. You'll give us your blessing, won't you? Oh Connie, I'm just so crazy about him——"

Whatever the rest of the mesage may have been Connie never knew.

She crushed the letter, envelope and all, into a tight ball and hurled it into the waste basket.

Next day the maid, cleaning as she regularly did on Saturdays, emptied the basket and burned its contents with the rest of the trash.

CHAPTER XXXI

AT LAST—THE TRUTH

Connie wrote to Maxine that she couldn't take part in the wedding. She did it as sweetly and politely as she knew how, promising to come down to Monroe Junction for the ceremony if it were at all possible.

"You mustn't count on me," she wrote, "because you know asking for time off on a new job isn't the same as when you've been around long enough to feel you've earned a vacation. I'm putting in extra hours this week because this seems to be a rush season. But I'll come if I possibly can. I know you'll be a lovely bride and Bob will be a handsome bridegroom."

She tried to feel just that way about it. Bob and Maxine should be very happy together. Each of them deserved to be. Still the darker moments would persist. After a man has vowed for years that you are the one girl in the world he could ever care for it isn't so easy to learn he's just as devoted to another.

Oh no—Connie could never be a member of that bridal party!

She pictured the scene. Maxine radiant in white with trailing veil of lace and Bob beside her facing the altar banked with ferns and flowers. Connie, standing with an arm bouquet of fragrant roses behind and a little to the right of

the bride. Wedding music. And then that timeless inevitable moment when Bob Knight's eyes should meet Connie's.

She'd never risk that!

Connie's mother wrote and urged her to come for the wedding.

"I couldn't possibly ask to get away" the girl replied. "You must remember that keeping my job and making good at it comes before everything else with me now."

The temporary job she had been giving was soliciting want-ad customers over the telephone. By the first of April she had been told her work would be permanent. It had been observed that Connie had an unusually pleasing telephone voice. She had been transferred from "rooms for rent" to "real estate" and the total number of advertisements she placed compared with the number of her calls won praise from Mrs. Kane.

Mrs. Kane superintended the want-ad girls. She talked to them every day about the business of selling want-ads. It began to be a game with Connie. The object in this game was to see which one of the fifteen girls could turn in the highest volume of sales by 6 o'clock each Saturday evening.

So far Connie's best place had been fifth.

"You're a born saleswoman," Mrs. Kane told her one day when they had lunch together. Mrs. Kane believed in getting well acquainted with her girls. "Some of these days you'll be leading the department. Yes, you will!"

Rose Carter also had asked Connie to have lunch with her. Miss Carter's lunch hour, however, was determined by her day's assignments

as a reporter and varied so frequently that the two had never been able to hit upon a mutually convenient date. Miss Carter settled the matter by finally taking Connie home with her to her apartment for dinner.

It was an attractive three-room suite with gray walls, white woodwork, and comfortable furniture which, thoroughly unobtrusive, seemed somehow "just right." A brilliant strip of Chinese embroidery thrown over the table set the color note of the living room. Pottery and glass in soft shades conveyed the same tones.

"Mind if I go right into the kitchen and start the food?" Miss Carter asked as she took the girl's coat and hat and stowed them out of sight. "You'll find powder and everything you want on the dressing table. Just make yourself at home here!"

The place was delightfully restful and quiet. When Connie returned to the living room after fluffing out her hair and restoring the peachy glow to her cheeks she heard her hostess bustling about the kitchenette.

"You're going to let me help, aren't you?" she asked.

"Why yes, if you want to. There's an apron there on that hook. Would you like to wash the lettuce?"

Within thirty minutes such a repast was ready as Connie had not tasted for weeks.

The table (set at one end of the kitchenette) was covered with a heavy Italian linen cloth and pottery dishes. Crystal candlesticks and glassware of Mediterranean blue made it altogether lovely. Thus served the menu of mushroom

omelet, asparagus salad, muffins and bar-le-duc jelly—all expertly prepared—was a delight.

"You're a wonderful cook!" Connie said.

"That's nice. I'm glad you think so. Here—you'll have some of the mushrooms now, won't you?"

Bavarian cream, coffee and cheese finished the meal.

While they were sipping the coffee Connie Norton looked dreamily across the table at her hostess.

"It must be—just lovely—to live here with so many pretty things around you and doing such interesting work."

Rose Carter laughed:

"Well, I do like this place pretty well. Been a long while acquiring the odds and ends you see around. But don't talk about my work being interesting! It's just exactly like everyone else's job—sometimes exciting, sometimes dull. How do you like it in the classified department?"

"Oh, I like it! I like it more all the time—and Mrs. Kane is so good to us. You know, I wasn't sure at first whether I was going to like working for a woman boss or not. But I do! And I certainly appreciate your finding the job on the paper for me."

"Hughes is the one to thank. I didn't do anything—oh, by the way that reminds me! I knew there was something I wanted to tell you. Remember that woman who testified at your husband's trial—West, what was her name? Dora or Flora or something like that?"

"Yes," answered Connie slowly. "I remember. Flo West."

"The same one who was wanted for shoplifting a while ago?"

"Yes."

"Well, they sent her up for five years yesterday afternoon. Did you see it in the papers?"

Connie's eyes were big. No, she hadn't seen it.

"You didn't? Well, I supposed you had. That wasn't what I was going to tell you though. Yesterday when I was over at the courthouse waiting with a photographer to get her picture I got the low-down on Flo West! Higgins was there. He's our police reporter and Higgins knows every crook in the underworld—just about. Sometimes I think he's in cahoots with them. Anyhow Higgins told me Flo's history."

Connie had put down her coffee cup. Two little icy hands were clasped together in her lap. Her eyes were burning.

"What—did he say?"

Rose Carter glanced up at once. She must have detected the girl's suppressed eagerness.

"Here—have some more coffee?"

Connie shook her head. She was waiting—watching Rose Carter's face.

"Well," Miss Carter went on, "Higgins says this is absolutely straight and he's dependable. It seems Flo West's been playing around with the gangsters for quite a while. Lately she's been devoting herself to Spike Carley but for some reason or other Carley gave her the gate. That's why she went back to shoplifting. Before that Mike Andrews was her man. And THIS is the point——"

Miss Carter hesitated a moment to emphasize

her words. The stillness of the room anticipated drama.

"While she was carrying on with Andrews Flo West fell hard for Gene Norton. Hard! And he wouldn't so much as look at her. That's the reason Flo testified against Norton. She was sore at him. Higgins says all the underworld knows that's true. Well, I just thought you'd be interested——"

"Are you—are you SURE?"

"Why, absolutely! I'll introduce you to Higgins and you can ask him to tell you all about it if you want to. Here—have some more coffee, dear. You're white as a sheet!"

Connie drank her coffee but the hand holding the cup trembled.

"I'm glad you told me that, Miss Carter," she said slowly. "You can probably imagine—well, I guess you know how much I'd like to believe it."

"Oh, it's true, all right. I'll send Higgins around to see you tomorrow if you want me to. Maybe he can tell you other things you'd like to know. Come on—let's go into the other room now and see what we can get on the radio."

As tactfully as possible Rose Carter tried to turn her guests thoughts to other subjects. She could hardly expect to succeed. Connie listened, responded politely but all the time her head was throbbing.

How she had wronged Gene!

Did she dare to believe this news?

As soon as possible the girl excused herself. She told Miss Carter it had been a lovely evening,

slipped into her coat, pulled on her hat and turned, ready to go.

"Miss Carter," Connie's voice was trembling, "I hope you'll NEVER KNOW how much—what you told me tonight—means!"

The door closed and the star woman reporter was left meditating that here, surely, was another subject for her gallery of "Sisters Under the Skin" which some day she hoped to write for a magazine.

When Alfred Higgins, a battered looking individual smoking a very large cigar, approached Connie Norton the next afternoon and introduced himself he repeated the story about Flo—with a few irrelevant details. Gene Norton had aroused Flo's wrath by his indifference. Gene had never, according to Higgins, made the fatal mistake of "getting mixed up with women."

That "West dame" was a "bad one" according to Higgins who appeared in every way to be a qualified judge.

She wrote a letter to Gene that night. There was nothing in it to suggest the information Connie had received but its whole tone was tenderness.

The letter, in a way, was a penance. There was so much which Connie felt she must make up to Gene.

She was at the telephone taking an order for a ten line insertion the next afternoon when she looked up to see Mrs. Kane coming toward her. Connie finished filling out the blank, thanked the customer and hung up the receiver. She heard the older woman say:

"You're wanted up in the editorial department, Mrs. Norton. Mr. Hughes wants to see you."

There was something she couldn't understand in the woman's face. Panic again faced Connie.

CHAPTER XXXII

GRIM STAKES IN THE BALANCE

Of course there was nothing for her to be afraid of. Connie Norton repeated this over and over to herself as she mounted the stairs but the deception failed.

Hughes had been kind before. Why should she be afraid to face him now? The truth of the matter was that illusions to which Connie Norton clung for happiness were so fragile she feared the slightest touch would shatter them.

Besides, every element of tragedy which had entered the girl's life had come unexpectedly. Involuntarily Connie had acquired the habit of stiffening for an attack.

When she reached the editorial floor Connie stopped in the women's cloakroom to smooth down her hair. Head phones used in the want-ad department left bobbed hair wrecked.

The girl who glanced back at her from the mirror was plainly pale and nervous. That would never do! Connie Norton did not forget that any interview goes better for a little powder on the nose. She pulled out her vanity case and applied the tiny puff. A touch of the comb to her copper curls set them in order.

Then Connie walked hesitantly down the corridor to the glass door on which in black lettering was the name:

DAVID R. HUGHES

She tapped upon that door.

"Come in!"

It was a big voice calling out to her. Of course Mr. Hughes wasn't anyone to be afraid of. She must tell him at once how pleasant she found her work in the classified department.

Connie pushed open the door and entered.

"Oh—how do you do, Mrs. Norton! Take a chair."

David Hughes waved toward a seat near his desk. Connie took the chair. The deep blue eyes, uncertain but hopeful, were turned toward him.

"Mrs. Kane said you wanted to see me, Mr. Hughes. I ought to have come before to tell you how much I like working here. It was lovely of you to find the job for me. I ought to have come to thank you long ago only I know you must be busy——"

"Glad you're getting along so well! So you don't think this newspaper is quite so bad as you did a month ago?"

Connie blushed.

"I—I guess I said a lot of things I shouldn't have that night, Mr. Hughes. I'm sorry."

"Oh, that's all right. Forget about it. I'm glad to hear you like your work though. You know that is one of the most important things in the world—for men and women to like tasks which are before them."

Evidently Mr. Hughes might have launched into an instructive editorial vein but he stopped himself.

"They tell me," he said, "you're getting to be quite a champion in your department."

Connie replied modestly that she was hardly that. She still wondered why he had sent for her. The explanation came immediately.

"I don't suppose you know—no, of course you don't—" Hughes began. "I have been going into a little investigation of your husband's case very quietly. It's extremely interesting. (How COULD he speak casually that way?) "What I have been investigating are legal details—won't bother you with them—technical and complicated. Now I understand that the judge's sentence was from one to three years——"

Hughes paused and Connie, an immovable statue, waited.

The man cleared his throat before he continued:

"Mrs. Norton, the minimum time in which your husband could hope for release—deducting all that is allowable for good behavior and all that—is about eighteen months. I understand he has a good record, that he is entitled to these deductions. Now maybe I shouldn't have spoken of this today but—well, I thought you'd like to know that a petition has gone to the governor's office for Gene Norton's release."

"Oh—Mr. Hughes!"

Words are quite useless to describe that sort of thing.

"Oh—MR. HUGHES!"

Utterly unexpected, following immediately upon what she had learned of Flo West's treachery, the shock was tremendous. Connie had stood up valiantly under misfortune. Now good news shattered her ramparts. It broke the bounds of

studied self-restraint. That voice was certainly not the voice of Connie Norton.

"Mr. Hughes—you mean there's a CHANCE of Gene being released?"

The man nodded.

"Excellent way to put it. Excellent. There is a CHANCE that your husband may be free in six weeks or so. I hope you won't count on this too confidently until we have more ground to feel that the governor's action is going to be favorable. We have no way of knowing what Governor Stewart will do. But I thought you should know about the effort."

"Oh, Mr. Hughes, how can I EVER, ever thank you enough? I don't know how to tell you——"

"Never mind! Never mind about that! By the way—it probably would be just as well not to mention this to anyone."

Connie promised. She would have promised anything. Connie Norton was simply stupified by the momentous news.

When it was gradually borne in upon her consciousness that David Hughes might have other ways of occupying the afternoon other than listening to her tell over and over again that she never could thank him enough for what he had done, Connie arose to go. There were tears in the deep blue eyes as she turned at the door.

"Anyhow, Mr. Hughes," said Connie, "you're —you're just WONDERFUL!"

If there is a man living less than ninety-eight years of age who wouldn't be pleased to hear such words from lips as red as Connie Norton's lips—well, he might just about as well not BE living!

Settling down to the business of urging real estate dealers to advertise their property after that was difficult.

Connie tried valiantly.

Buzzing heads among the other girls in the classified department puzzled over what could have happened to make Connie Norton look so strangely changed. It was easy to tell that something had happened. What could it be? Even Mrs. Kane was curious.

None of them received an explanation.

Connie's clear voice went on just as it had earlier in the afternoon, asking central for "Drake 127", or "Crescent 6510 Red", and other numbers and quoting space rates.

It was deep in her heart that the emotional flame smouldered—love, anxiety, dread, eagerness and suspense.

Not only that afternoon but for weeks to come. Sometimes Connie wondered how the time could drag so slowly.

Would April never end? Would those first days of May never pass? Connie was discovering that days can turn suddenly into decades. And through all this there was no further word from David Hughes.

It was hard now to write to Gene. Those things which were closest to the girl's heart, which she most wanted to say, were forbidden. She told him instead about her work and about the other girls. She wrote that it was much pleasanter in the newspaper office than it had been at the theatre, she liked the hours better too. She wrote Gene how beautiful the parks had become with the springtime.

Letters which came to Connie in reply were always brief. There was a library available from which Gene could take out books. Nights after the day's work was done, he read. He had discovered a lot of interesting stuff in some old books written by guys that were dead now. Funny how so many things struck those old-timers just about the way they seem to a person today.

After a particularly nervous day when Connie felt she could stand the uncertainty no longer she went to talk to Hughes. He was sympathetic but there was nothing to be done. It wasn't unusual to run into delay like this. In fact it was the usual thing. As soon as he learned anything definitely he promised she would know it.

It was six days later that David Hughes sent for her.

"I think you are going to have some word—favorable or unfavorable—at last," he said. "Henderson, our state house man, tells me that it may come any day now. By the end of the week at the latest."

Connie was growing accustomed to strain. It seemed she had been living with it always.

"Mr. Hughes," she said—"I'm—praying!"

Hughes patted the girl's shoulder and told her that was the right thing to do.

And so that last week drew, day by day, nearer to its close. Each morning Connie could scarcely wait to get a newspaper. As every edition later in the day came to the classified office she gave it an eager search. She learned to scan columns closely.

Thursday of the all-important week passed.

Friday came.

And Friday evening when Connie was alone in her room assuring herself that tomorrow's headlines would tell the tale she heard Mrs. Whitaker's voice calling that there was a gentleman waiting downstairs.

It didn't matter much who it was. Without even bothering to look into the glass to see that her nose was powdered Connie hurried down the stairs.

There was no one in the hall. Mrs. Whitaker must have shown him—whoever it was—into the parlor. Connie turned to the left and stepped through the open doorway.

Half-way across the room, holding his hat in very evident embarrassment, stood Bob Knight.

CHAPTER XXXIII

DREAMING

"Why—why Bob! This is a surprise to see you here!"

"Yes. I suppose it is."

Connie had stopped in the doorway. The lemon colored voile frock she had slipped into for the evening at home struck sparks in her copper hair. The girl's cheeks were pale but her lips flamed. Absence of color from Connie's face meant she really was agitated.

"Won't you—sit down?"

Bob hesitated. He was still holding the hat and looking at Connie uncertainly.

"It's pretty late. I guess I shouldn't have come out without telephoning."

Nevertheless he took the chair.

Connie sat on the stiff and bumpy davenport. It was a rather uncomfortable room in which to receive company. She leaned forward.

"It doesn't matter about not telephoning," she said. "I'm awfully glad to see you, Bob. You're —looking fine! Did you come from Monroe Junction?"

"Yes. Dad wanted me to see about some things for the store. Came up yesterday. I'm going out tonight on the midnight train. Thought maybe you'd have some message for your folks that I could give them."

"Why yes, of course. Tell them—oh, let me see! Well, tell them that I really AM going to write a long letter right away. I've been meaning to all week but you know how it is! Oh—and you must tell Maxine that I'm afraid I can't get down for the wedding. I'm awfully sorry——"

Connie's words broke. Bob was looking away across the room.

It was Connie who picked up the conversation and kept it going.

"Why, I guess I'm forgetting to congratulate the bridegroom! I'm so glad for you, Bob, and I know you'll be just so happy! Maxine's a wonderful girl——"

"Yes, she is all right. That's—that's one of the things I was going to tell you, Connie." Bob seemed to be choosing words carefully. His glance now was direct and clear but there was something about the boy's eyes which gave Connie Norton a queer, tightening feeling in the throat.

"It—isn't going to be next week," Bob went on. "The wedding's postponed." His eyes were on the floor again. "Maxine's grandmother was taken pretty sick last week. She lives with the Fishers, you know, and so Maxine decided the wedding would have to wait. Her grandmother is seventy-four years old and she's always lived with them. Anyhow for years. I don't know—we haven't exactly set the date again. It's sort of indefinite."

"That's too bad. I'm awfully sorry."

"Thanks. Maybe you'll be able to come down after all. It might be next month or it might not be for six weeks." The words sounded forced,

as though the boy were obstinately, stubbornly forcing them.

"Well, I—I will if I can."

Connie began to talk to Bob about other subjects. Somehow neither one of them was at ease when they talked about Maxine. "But I'm certainly not JEALOUS", Connie told herself. "I'm not!" Her words skipped along lightly. She talked about her new job, asked about friends in Monroe Junction, talked almost constantly.

The girl felt the disturbing sensation that if she should stop talking something unpleasant might happen.

So the words rattled on. It was a strange interview.

Bob Knight pulled out his watch and looked at it.

"Well—guess I'd better be on my way. Got to go to the hotel first and I don't want to miss that train."

He arose from his chair and Connie stood too.

"Anything else I can tell your Mother for you?" Bob asked. "When will you be down home again?"

"Oh, I don't know! I haven't any idea. Just tell Mother I'm going to write her a long letter. And—tell Maxine I'll write to her too."

She held out her hand in a good-bye, and Bob took it.

Why—it did seem queer to be talking formally this way with Bob Knight. Everything was queer.

"Goodbye, Connie."

"Goodbye, Bob."

He was gone. The front door closed behind

him and Connie Norton went up the stairs back to her own room.

She undressed slowly, put out the light and crept into bed. Tomorrow morning was to tell the tale! For an hour Connie tossed about, occupied with a thousand thoughts. At last she found sleep.

* * * * * * *

There were the headlines! In large black type Connie saw the words the minute she opened her newspaper:

GOVERNOR ADDS
SIGNATURE TO
NORTON PARDON

The paragraph below told Connie that in two weeks Gene Norton would be free. Free to come to her again. FREE!

There was no reason now to conceal the elation she felt. Connie rushed through breakfast. She could scarcely swallow a mouthful. It was true then. ACTUALLY TRUE!

Gene was coming back to her. Gene was going to be free!

She wanted to tell the whole world, to dance, to sing.

What were two weeks—two tiny little weeks—after all these months? Oh, how they would celebrate! They would go to Monroe Junction and she would make her Father and Mother and everyone understand just how wonderful Gene was. Everybody would know about it. She was going to make up to him for all those dreary months of separation. She would make up to

Gene for the way she had doubted him. She could do that!

And Mr. Hughes. She must thank Mr. Hughes and tell him how wonderful everything was going to be now. And she would write a long letter to Gene. She could do that during the noon hour.

Oh, there was everything—EVERYTHING—to be done now!

Connie wasted no time powdering her nose or primping that morning. She didn't need to. There was an all-pervading radiance about the girl that would have marked her in a thousand.

She hurried to the classified department office.

"Mrs. Kane—oh, Mrs. Kane, did you see it in the morning paper? Yes, isn't it wonderful? Just wonderful! And, Mrs. Kane, will it be all right if I run upstairs just for a minute to see Mr. Hughes? He started it, you know. Wasn't it wonderful of him? Oh, that's so sweet of you. I won't take more than five minutes. Honestly I won't."

She was off like a whirlwind to the managing editor's office to try to express in miserably inadequate sentences how grateful and divinely happy she felt.

Connie was willing to talk to reporters, to ANYONE, about this marvelous good news. Yes, she thought she would write a letter to the Governor!

There was no letter to Gene written that noon hour. Instead Connie had a better idea.

She made her way to a telegraph office and sent this message:

"So happy darling wild to see you letter follows love—Connie."

With that attended to it was easier in the office to try to make a pretense of completing the day's work. Connie did try. She called telephone number after telephone number and talked to real estate dealers. She filled out order blanks and filed them.

Six o'clock came and still the glorious news was uppermost in Connie's mind. She had intoxicated herself with enthusiasm. There was so much to plan, so much to think about.

It never occurred to Connie that plans may go astray.

She sat in her own room a little later penning the letter to Gene. It was a terribly important letter. There was so much to write and she had to be sure—oh, to be VERY sure, that he would understand.

The only way seemed to start at the beginning and tell the whole thing.

Connie never before had written Gene the exact circumstances of her departure from the Riviera theatre. She did it now—incidentally, of course—in order to explain to Gene about Mr. Hughes and all that he had done for them. She felt Gene should know that now.

Then she went on to tell him that she was coming to meet him the very hour, the very minute he was free. She would be waiting. Waiting impatiently, but what was waiting now that they knew it would end?

They would go to Monroe Junction first and stay with her parents until they were ready for their trip to California just as nine months before they had planned. It was all to be very wonderful.

A great deal more in the same vein followed.

Connie wrote that she had already told Mrs. Kane she would have to find a new girl to take her place. That was the fair thing to do of course. And everyone around the office had been wonderful.

"Darling—doesn't it just seem as though all the happiness in the world is coming our way? Doesn't it? And you deserve it all, Gene. I know that you do. Oh honey, write to me!"

That was the way the long letter ended.

As soon as it was finished Connie changed from her lounging robe into a street dress, picked up purse and key and went out to the nearest mail-box. There she deposited the letter and returned to her room.

That night, wearied by the day's tremendous excitement, Connie slept soundly. Like many a girl whose happiness is wrapped up in one man she dreamed of love scenes.

But love scenes require two!

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE AWAKENING

Fourteen days may drag themselves out until they seem like fourteen years. It is really terrible how a calendar will obstinately insist upon taking its own pokey course turning days into weeks.

Connie Norton loathed her calendar. She thought the end of June would never, never come.

There were many things which broke into the days of waiting but nothing could send time flying fast enough. There were letters from her parents (less enthusiastic than she would have had them) which urged Connie to bring Gene to Monroe Junction as she planned.

There were days in the office which seemed twice as long as they had ever seemed before. Connie had plenty of work to do and she was grateful to Mrs. Kane for this. Work was really better than anything else to make you forget how slowly the clock ticked.

Best of all there were Gene's letters. They came in ready response to her own and Connie would not, even for one minute, admit that there was less of warmth in them than she wished.

Men didn't like to write the way girls did. That, Connie said to herself, was why there were no "dears" and "darlings" in Gene Norton's letters as there were in Connie's own.

She even went so far as to think she preferred to have him write that way. It meant that Gene's feelings were much deeper and more powerfully stirred than those of young men who might glibly dash off poetic phrases.

Connie Norton's own bubbling exuberance persisted.

There were so many things for her to do.

Take one hundred girls (they don't even need to be pretty girls—just the ordinary garden variety) and assure them that within two weeks each is to be united with the man of her choice. Two weeks to wait! And upon what will the thought of each of those one hundred girls rest? Clothes, of course! The prettiest, daintiest, most becoming outfits of clothing obtainable so that each little bride will look the loveliest possible to this important Young Man.

One hundred girls out of one hundred will do that.

There might be one single exception—say among that one hundred—who would go off and write sonnets or compose a love song or paint a water color instead.

Most girls are supremely interested in their trousseaux.

Connie Norton became deeply concerned about shopwindows and department store advertisements and style magaines. She was looking prettier than she had for months. She wanted to look lovelier still. More than anything else in the world she wanted Gene Norton to think she was the most beautiful girl in the world.

And that was not egotism!

Connie was being swept by urges old as the

race itself. Her beauty was her marriage gift to Gene.

It was all so wonderful to know that after the weary, dreary months everything was to come out right at last.

The fourteenth day of June was Connie's birthday.

Nineteen years old she was that morning. But nineteen years old didn't seem to be any different from eighteen. She found a letter from her Mother in the morning mail. A package arrived at the office later which proved to be a birthday cake!

Connie cut the delicious marble cake with its nut frosting into pieces so that there was one for every member of the department. Mrs. Kane sent out for ice cream and at 4 o'clock the classified office held a birthday party.

"Sure will miss you, Connie!" Nadine Hart who sat at Connie's right declared.

All of the girls knew she was leaving at the end of the month.

"Oh—I'll miss you too. A lot! But I guess you don't blame me, do you?"

"Not on your life. I should say not! Say—any day I wouldn't trade my pay check for a job dishwashing for the right man! Show me the chance!"

Nadine was in the midst of a "heavy" romance with a dental student. She thought Connie Norton's devotion to her husband was comparable only to Juliet's love for Romeo.

It was a lively party. Connie realized how much she liked everyone there. Truly she would be sorry to leave them.

That is—she would be sorry if she didn't have Gene to more than make up for everything.

Mrs. Kane went with Connie on her most important shopping trip. They took the noon hour Wednesday when fifteen minutes overtime would be excusable.

The engrossing business in hand was the selection of an ensemble suit. It was the costume Gene would see Connie in when she first met him. Connie had made the rounds of every shop in the neighborhood which was to be considered. Her choice had simmered down to three models.

First they went to Belgrave's. Connie slipped into a kasha cloth outfit marked down now to $39.50. She turned slowly about before Mrs. Kane, walked back and forth, slipped off the coat and considered the dress alone, went through all the usual maneuvering of a pretty girl trying to decide upon a purchase.

After a little discussion they left the store, promised the clerk to be back within an hour if Connie should decide to buy the suit. They hurried to look at the others.

Next came Perry-Carstairs. Here there were two costumes which Connie asked the clerk to bring out. Mrs. Kane examined them. They went to a fitting room where Connie put on one outfit and then the other.

"There isn't any question!" her friend told her. "The blue one was made for you!"

"You really think you like it best?"

"Oh—absolutely! It's just the right shade and the blouse is beautiful with your eyes. And it would be practical too."

"Well, I'm glad you think so. You know I

liked this best myself but it helps a lot to have someone else's opinion before you decide. Yes (to the clerk) I'll take it."

After that there was the hat to be selected and gloves and shoes. And a purse which matched the shoes. And then a scarf.

Connie had a grand time making these purchases. And she could afford them too. Since leaving Monroe Junction last fall she had spent practically nothing on clothes. The things she had brought with her and which her Mother sent were good enough. Besides, she hadn't cared much about what she wore.

Because of this she took all the more pleasure in buying finery now. There was a little silk dress beside the ensemble. It was blue too. And a sweater matching exactly Connie's tawny hair. There were several pair of fragile chiffon hose and some lovely underthings.

Then when they were all bought, when the very last call to a real estate dealer about Sunday want-ads was made and the girls had said over and over again "Goodbye, Connie" and "My, but we'll miss you!" and kissed her and asked her to come back to see them sometime—then, at last Connie was ready to go to Gene!

There was a blank space (at least it was blank in Connie's mind afterward) during which things happened such as paying Mrs. Whitaker for sending the trunk to the depot and getting into a taxicab with her bags and finally realizing that actually she was on the train.

Why do they run trains so slowly?

Why do they have to stop at so many different

stations and why do people keep getting off and on all the time?

Why does it take so long to travel a hundred miles?

Connie's anxiety during the preceding weeks was nothing compared with the hours she spent on that train.

She knew that actually all she had to do was sit in her chair car and wait and after a certain period of time the journey would end.

To occupy herself she tried to think how Gene would look. That didn't help. Rattle—clatter—chug. The train dragged on.

Finally it was time to pull out the vanity case, to wipe away a tiny black smudge from her cheek, to powder her nose and see that the blue felt was pulled down properly.

She was going down the steps of the train. She was stepping into a taxicab. Ten minutes more and she would be in Gene's arms!

The cab traveled over familiar ground. At last it came to a halt and Connie stepped out.

"Don't go!" she said to the driver. "I'll be back with someone in just a minute."

The girl disappeared through a doorway leading into the warden's office. That was where Gene had told her to wait.

"Mrs. Norton?"

"Oh yes. I—I'm on time all right?"

This must be the warden who was facing her—a big man in dark clothes with a broad scar on his left cheek.

"Yes."

"Then—where's Gene?"

It was the first time in all that eager, excited trip that Connie's lips had trembled or that she had felt the least misgiving. There must be something here terribly wrong!

Warden Bennet turned toward his desk and picked up an envelope.

"Here," he said, handing it to Connie. "Norton asked me to give you this."

"But can't I see him now? Isn't he—free?"

"Oh yes," the big man answered. "He's free. Yes. Norton left here an hour ago."

CHAPTER XXXV

A GUEST AT THE WEDDING

"THERE's a taxi driver outside wanting to know if the lady still wants him to wait."

The words brought Connie Norton swiftly back to the situation. She had been sitting for five minutes in the warden's office looking at a sheet of note paper before her, reading and re-reading the words on it, trying in a dim, groping manner to make sense of them.

The taxi driver was waiting for her—for her and for Gene. But Gene wasn't going—Gene had gone!

"Tell me where he's gone!" she begged.

Warden Bennet shook his head.

"I don't know, Mrs. Norton. I'm sorry but really, I don't. You've—read the letter, haven't you?"

Connie was folding it and putting it back into the envelope.

"Gene will get along all right," Bennet was saying to her. "Now if I were you I'd just go on home now and forget about this."

Connie had risen from her chair. Apparently she didn't even hear his words. Without a sign of farewell she walked through the doorway and down the steps to the taxi.

"Back to the station!" she told the driver in a low, strained voice.

Not once during the drive or later, sitting in the stuffy station waiting room, did Connie Norton cry. Tears had come easily before when her emotions were stirred. Now her eyes were dry, a little wild and bewildered but there were no tears.

What should she do?

She couldn't go back to Chicago. No. She couldn't go back there where only that morning she had been so deliriously happy. She couldn't do that.

There were other places, of course.

But her trunk was on its way to Monroe Junction. Father and Mother were expecting her. They were expecting her to come with Gene.

Connie walked up to the ticket window, asked for a ticket for Monroe Junction and paid the fare. She returned to the bench and sat beside her traveling bag until train time.

What it meant was—defeat.

She had been wrong all along, all these months when she had been trying so hard to fight her battle. She had been wrong when she talked to Mr. Hughes, wrong when she argued with her parents.

Well, she surrendered now.

The girl who stepped off the train at Monroe Junction later that night to be gathered into her father's arms was very different from the girl who that same morning had boarded a train in Chicago.

"Daughter—daughter! Now it's all right—it's all right—never mind about it. You're home now. Don't cry Connie—don't cry——"

Alexander Marsh tried to soothe his daughter. He didn't like to have everyone at the depot see

Connie carrying on this way. It was sure to start talk!

He led her over to the nondescript flivver "taxi" which fortunately no other passengers had engaged. Marsh helped his daughter inside, gave the driver the address and then took the seat beside Connie.

He didn't ask questions. After they were at home with mother would be time enough for that.

The girl lay in her father's arms and her sobbing gradually quieted. She dabbled a handkerchief to her eyes.

"I'm—I'm going to stay home now, Father."

"That'll please your Mother and me."

"Ooh, Father!"

Then again another burst of tears. In an awkward, masculine way Marsh tried to comfort her.

Ten minutes later, seated between her father and mother on the familiar davenport Connie began the story. It wasn't easy to tell. There were interruptions when Connie had to wipe her eyes and wait until she could make her voice behave. There was one time when her words broke off and a long rest on mother's shoulder was necessary before she could go ahead.

"Here—here's Gene's letter," Connie said at last, fumbling in her handbag and drawing out the envelope.

Mr. and Mrs. Marsh read it together silently:

"Dear Connie:

When you get this I'll be a long way off so writing is the only way I guess to say goodbye. You were a good little pal and we had some great times. You probably won't believe it but I do appreciate all you've tried to do for me. Anyhow

it's better for you if we don't ever see each other again. So goodbye, Connie. And good luck.

GENE."

Without comment Mrs. Marsh folded the sheet of paper again, slipped it into the envelope and handed it back to Connie.

"Here, dear," she said, "you go upstairs and put some cold water on your eyes and after you've had your bath get into a kimona and come down. We'll all have a cup of tea together in the kitchen. I think a little something hot will be good for us."

There were days following in which Connie Norton assured herself it was all for the best that things had turned out as they had. There were other days when, no matter how much she tried, Connie couldn't disguise from her parents the swollen eyelids and drawn face which told of sleepless nights. There were still other days when Connie couldn't think at all. They were the most miserable.

She refused to go out with her Mother. Connie remembered how neighbors had stared at her last fall. Before long Alexander Marsh began to talk about buying a car so that they could get out into the country evenings.

He was uncomfortably aware, as was his wife, that this cloistered existence was the wrong thing for Connie.

But his daughter couldn't be persuaded otherwise.

Mrs. Marsh explained to her neighbors (not that they believed her!) and to the members of the Sewing Circle that Connie was feeling poorly

because of her shut-in winter in the city. That was why she had come home to rest.

Maxine Fisher ran in frequently.

Connie tried to be as friendly as ever with Maxine. She really didn't feel well enough, she told her, to attend Maxine's shower parties but she did begin a luncheon set in cross stitch which was to be a wedding gift.

After the luncheon set was finished Connie made a bit of lingerie which was mostly frothy lace, copied from a garment displayed in one of the big Chicago shop windows. This was for Maxine too.

"It's the prettiest thing I ever saw in my life!" the bride-to-be insisted when she received the gift.

"Connie, you WILL come to the wedding, won't you? Honestly I'm just counting on it. I know you haven't been going out but really it would just seem terrible to have you here in town and not come to the wedding."

"All right, Maxine. I'll promise."

August came and passed. It was finally September before Maxine Fisher's bridal morning arrived. It appeared that the Grandmother whose ill health had postponed the wedding in June was to be a chronic invalid, improved now but never to be entirely well. Invitations were issued for the wedding in August. Then in September Maxine stood before the mirror in her own room, inspecting herself in the long lace veil and white satin gown.

The ceremony was to be performed in the church where for years the bride had been the choir soloist.

Connie Norton, at that same moment, was walking down the street beside her mother. It was high noon on Wednesday, of all the week the time most favorable for brides. The sun was shining brightly. The day was warm enough so that neither Connie nor her mother were wearing coats.

Connie's dress was the lovely soft blue she had purchased in Chicago. Mrs. Marsh was decorously clothed in black flat crepe.

"I know Maxine's going to make a lovely bride," the mother said.

"Oh yes!"

Connie wondered if her mother or anyone else could realize how hard for her the ordeal was to be. It was queer about Bob Knight. She had seen him only twice since her return home and he had never come to call at all. Everyone seemed to have forgotten that she and Bob had once been anything more than the most casual of friends.

Now in an hour or so Bob would be married to Maxine.

Mrs. Marsh led the way and Connie followed into the church. As a youngster Connie had attended Sunday school there. It all looked very familiar. The altar had been beautifully banked with green and there were baskets of pink roses on either side. There were roses too massed before the windows. Lovely feathery green ferns made the background.

How unlike Connie Marsh's wedding!

It was a bitter thought and the girl knew it. She tried to banish it. The organist was playing something solemnly beautiful. After all the religious service of marriage in a church is very love-

ly. This was no time for bitterness. Connie tried to be happy because she knew Maxine and Bob were going to be happy.

Oh yes! Bob would be happy now!

Connie and Mrs. Marsh had taken seats directly on the aisle at the right side of the church. It was the aisle down which Maxine and her attendants would come.

Suddenly Connie was aware that Joe Walters, one of the ushers, was coming down the aisle toward her. What could Joe want?

The young man had stopped beside her and was whispering into Connie's ear.

She turned toward her Mother:

"Just a moment," she murmured, "I'll be right back. I don't know—they seem to want me."

Then Connie Norton arose and hurried down the aisle.

* * * * * * *

CHAPTER XXXVI

SOMEWHERE IN TEXAS

NATURALLY, the minute the girl arose there was speculation in that church filled with wedding guests. Connie Marsh—no she was Connie Norton now! Yes, it was Connie. Did you see Joe Walters talking to her? Do you suppose—oh no, of course not, but do you actually suppose——

Hushed whispers were going around the church.

Mrs. Marsh of all that gathering, was probably the most agitated but she held her peace. A dull, pinkish tinge spread slowly upward over Mrs. Marsh's cheeks.

It was enough for one member of that family to become conspicuous. Mrs. Marsh looked down at a hymn book.

Nothing startling met Connie's gaze in the outer room of the church. She pushed open the door following Joe Walters and stepped inside. Maxine was standing there arrayed in beautiful creamy satin and her lace veil. Maxine looked pale but brides are generally white-cheeked.

"Connie!" Maxine exclaimed.

"Why yes, Max—what's happened? What's the matter?"

"Oh, Connie, I couldn't stand it another minute. I just HAD to see you. Listen, Connie—do you think—do you think I OUGHT to marry Bob?"

"Why, Maxine! What in the world——"

"Oh, that's it—that's why I made Joe get you. Listen, Connie, they're almost ready to begin. The music's playing now. I ought to be starting in but I CAN'T DO IT! I can't go on with this!"

Genuinely horrified, Connie went up to the girl. Before she had time to interrupt Maxine's words were rushing headlong.

"Tell me, Connie—tell me the truth—do you think Bob loves me? Do you think he isn't marrying me—just because you wouldn't have him?"

Connie Norton felt suddenly faint. Instead of giving way to the impulse she pulled herself together squarely and looked into the eyes of the distraught Maxine.

"You're making yourself a ridiculous little fool," she said slowly. "Just a ridiculous little fool. Of course Bob Knight loves you. You are the only girl in the world he cares for and the only one who can make him happy. Now if you've got any sense at all go in there and marry him!"

Maxine was quiet for an instant. She stared at Connie solemnly and then said in a low voice:

"Do you—really—mean that?"

"Of course I mean it," Connie snapped. "Behaving the way you are now is the first time I've ever seen you do anything, Maxine, that I'd say was unworthy of Bob." Suddenly Connie's tone changed. The organist was beginning the Mendelsohn music. "Go on darling," Connie said softly, "go on and have your beautiful wedding. Bob's waiting for you."

She kissed Maxine, caught up a powder puff and touched it to the bride's cheeks, smiled at her again and stepped back.

Another minute and Maxine Fisher was marching slowly down the aisle of the church on her father's arm.

Connie stood alone in the vestry room. She couldn't very well go in now that the ceremony had started. She could stand at the door of course and hear it all. But that wasn't what she wanted to do.

More than anything else in the world Connie wanted to run away by herself. Everything had been all right until she heard that wedding music.

Connie glanced behind her just once and tiptoed through the church door.

As fast as she could she hurried down a back street toward her father's home. Once in the living room she flung herself down upon the davenport and closed her eyes.

Well—all that she had told Maxine was true. Of course it was. The round of parties Maxine had been through and all the excitement of the wedding (it was a big wedding for Monroe Junction) was enough to make any girl lose her wits.

Connie kept her eyes closed. Presently she thought how blissfully peaceful it was to be here alone.

Alone—alone! That was the way things were to be for Connie Norton all the rest of her life!

The doorbell rang and the sound startled Connie. She didn't want to answer it. Probably an agent with some new kind of brushes or magazine subscriptions. Everybody they knew was at the wedding now. It couldn't be anything important.

Ring-a-ling-a-ling! Goodness but it sounded loud in the deserted house. No. She wouldn't answer.

Ring-aling-aling!

On the fourth ring Connie rose to her feet. She couldn't listen to that jangling bell any longer without throwing something and if she did that the person waiting would know there was someone within the house.

Connie went into the front hall, pulled open the door.

She didn't say a word. She just stood there.

"Can—can I come in?"

"Why, why of course. Yes, come on in. Yes, of course!" Connie was saying words now but they didn't mean anything. She held open the screen door. A man stepped into the hall.

The next minute Connie Norton's slim figure was practically buried in two grey tweed arms that held her, oh, so very closely against a tweed vest.

Two persons unable to see each other because of the tears in their eyes and because, anyhow, Connie's face was smothered somewhere in a tweed shoulder, were embracing.

"But, Gene!" Connie found her voice at last. "Oh, Gene darling, how did you get here? Where did you come from? OH, GENE!"

He couldn't answer. There are more important uses for lips than talking.

He didn't talk at all except for queer broken strays of words until ten minutes later when Connie and Gene were comfortably occupying a chair designed for one. Connie's head was snuggled close on Gene's shoulder. Gene's cheek was delightfully warm and near.

"Honey," Gene whispered, "you're here!"

And that discovery of his had all the grandeur

in its utterance of a Peary discovering the North Pole, a Balboa gazing upon the Pacific or a Lindbergh alighting in Paris.

"No, dear, you mean YOU'RE here," Connie answered.

"Anyway you're—oh you're just wonderful, Connie! Gee, you've got beautiful eyes, and lips, and cheeks and hair!"

Gene Norton had a way of punctuating each of these remarks.

Suddenly he looked at her questioningly.

"Want to hear about it?"

Connie nodded. Her face just then was a vision. Connie Norton was smiling through tears —tears which were a triumphant victory over pain.

"Put your head down close to my shoulder, dear, and I'll tell you the whole story!"

She did exactly as the lord and master commanded.

"Wait a minute—" There had to be interruptions with those red lips so near.

"You see, Connie," Gene was saying presently, "I knew it was a rotten thing to do when I left that note for you with the Warden, but I didn't know what else to do. I knew just the sight of you—just one look at you again—would set me crazy. And I couldn't come home with you then to your folks the way you said. Why I knew I wasn't good enough to ever see you again. Oh, I mean it. When I found out how you got Hughes to go to the Governor and fix up that pardon I swore I'd get out of your life and stay out."

"But Darling——"

"Oh, I know what you're going to say. You're

so wonderful! But that's what I told myself, see? I said, 'All right, Gene Norton. You've got your chance now. Get out of here and get a job and work for six months straight. If you can do that —well then you can put it up to Connie.' "

"But I couldn't wait six months, Connie. I just couldn't! The Warden loaned me some money himself, see? And he got me a job down in Texas. That's where I've been all the time. Working with a construction gang. Gee, I like it there too! The most wonderful climate. And the people are fine too. The Boss let me off to come up here. You see I—well, I just couldn't stand it any longer without seeing you and I got to thinking what a rotten trick it was to leave you that letter and just disappear. And then I thought maybe if I waited six months all the chance I'd have to show you how things happened would be gone.

"Well, it got so bad I finally went to the Boss and talked to him. Of course he knows all about me. The Warden told him, see? And anyhow he says I'm doing the job better than the last guy and he wants me to stay all through the winter. So when I told him about you he said, why sure go on up and see your girl and bring her back with you!"

There was a moment of electric silence.

"Connie—do you think maybe you could like it down in Texas?"

"Like it? Why, Gene—lover! Darling! I'd like it—if you were there—at the North Pole. Come on now, tell me. Honestly, do you like me just the least, tiny bit?"

Gene told her.

THE END

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